

History

In the Yucatán, history is never kept in the past. It ebbs and flows through every aspect of modern life, like a thousand-limbed juggernaut hell-bent on its own preservation. From the beginning, it's been a tale of inequality, predation and subjugation; intellectual and spiritual triumph; independence, fame and famine. And, of course, like just about everywhere else in the world, it's mostly been a tale of greed.

While Europe was sliding into the Dark Ages, the people of the Yucatán had already reached what is arguably the pinnacle of New World civilization. The conquest and eventual subjugation of the Maya created vast riches for the landed elite as the region continued to develop independently from the rest of Mexico – though it could not help but be influenced by its powerful neighbor. More recently it has faced a different sort of cultural revolution with mass tourism taking deep root along the coast. Still, beyond Cancún's glitzy façade beats the syncopated pulse of an ancient culture charting its delicate course through the tendriled pathways of history.

EARLY AMERICANS

Conventional wisdom holds that humans arrived in the Americas from Siberia around 40,000 years ago, via a land bridge across the Bering Strait that connected present-day Alaska with Asia. Recent evidence dates human presence in Mexico's central plateau to roughly 13,000 years ago, and the Yucatán was probably populated a few millennia later. By 5700 BC people were planting maize (corn) in the Tehuacán valley in what is now Puebla state.

By 2000 BC many Mesoamericans (peoples between present-day central Mexico and Nicaragua) were cultivating corn, squash, avocados and beans, and raising chickens, turkeys and dogs. They continued to hunt and fish as they had for generations, but they became dependent upon crops.

Mexico's ancestral civilization arose near the Gulf Coast, in the humid lowlands of southern Veracruz and neighboring Tabasco. These were the Olmecs, who invented a hieroglyphic writing system and erected ceremonial centers for the practice of religious rituals. Best known for the colossal heads they carved from basalt slabs, the Olmecs developed an artistic style, highlighted by jaguar motifs.

Even after their demise, aspects of Olmec culture lived on among their neighbors, paving the way for the later accomplishments of Maya art, architecture and science. Borrowing significantly from the Olmecs, the Zapotec culture arose in the highlands of Oaxaca at Monte Albán, and subsequent civilizations at Teotihuacán (near current-day Mexico City) and at El Tajín in northern Veracruz also show Olmec influence.

For a concise but pretty complete account of the ancient cultures of southern Mexico and Guatemala, read *The Maya*, by Michael D Coe.

The jaguar motifs first used by the Olmecs were adopted by successive civilizations throughout Mesoamerica.

YUCATÁN'S DINOSAUR-KILLING METEORITE

For the past two decades there has been growing scientific agreement that a meteorite slammed into the Yucatán 65 million years ago, kicking up enough debris to block out the sun for a decade, which either triggered a global freeze or made the air so unbreathable that two-thirds of the earth's species became extinct.

In 1980 scientists theorized that the extinction of the dinosaurs had been caused by an 'impact event,' such as a meteor crash. Using seismic monitoring equipment, scientists found evidence for the existence of such an enormous crater off the northern coast of Yucatán near the port of Chicxulub.

ENTER THE MAYA

Archaeologists believe Maya-speaking people first appeared in the highlands of Guatemala as early as 2500 BC, and in the following century groups of Maya relocated to the lowlands of the Yucatán Peninsula.

Agriculture played an increasingly important role in Maya life. Watching the skies and noting the movements of the planets and stars, the Maya were able to correlate their astronomical observations with the rains and agricultural cycles. As the Maya improved their agricultural skills, their society stratified into various classes and occupations. Villages sprang up beneath the jungle canopy and temples were constructed from the abundant limestone. An easily carved substance, limestone allowed the builders to demonstrate a high degree of artistic expression. The material could also be made into plaster, upon which artists painted murals to chronicle events.

Local potentates were buried beneath these elaborate temples. As each successive leader had to have a bigger temple, larger platforms were placed upon earlier ones, forming gigantic step pyramids with a thatched shelter on top. Often these temple-pyramids were decorated with huge stylized masks. More and more pyramids were built around large plazas, much as the common people clustered their thatched houses facing a common open space. This heralded the flourishing of the Classic Maya civilization.

The Golden Age

Over the six centuries of the Classic Maya period (AD 250 to 925), the Maya made spectacular intellectual and artistic strides, a legacy that can still be admired today throughout the peninsula. The great ceremonial centers at Copán, Tikal, Yaxchilán (p243), Palenque (p238), and especially Kaminaljuyú (near present-day Guatemala City), flourished during the early phase of this period. Around AD 400 armies from Teotihuacán invaded the Maya highlands, imposing their rule and their culture for a time, though they were finally absorbed into the daily life of the Maya, a marriage that engendered the so-called Esperanza culture.

Mundo Maya online (www.mayadiscovery.com) features articles on Maya cosmology, navigation and agriculture, among other aspects of this incredible ancient civilization.

The elite of the Classic Maya often received enemies of a sweet mead name *balché*. They also thought being cross-eyed was particularly beautiful.

TIMELINE

up to 10,000 BC

The first humans arrive in the Yucatán region. The numbers of grassland animals dwindle as temperatures significantly increase over the next 2000 years, leading indigenous populations to begin larger-scale agriculture.

3114 BC

Our current universe is created – at least according to Maya mythology. Archaeologists have even been able to pin down a specific date for the creation: August 13, 3114 BC.

2400 BC

Maya-speaking farmers arrive in the Yucatán Peninsula, while elsewhere in Mexico more developed 'civilization' is beginning to take root. The Olmec culture creates a system of writing. Olmec culture later influences the Zapotec culture.

1000 BC–AD 250

The Pre-Classic period. The earliest Maya villages begin to form in Yucatán, Chiapas and Guatemala. The Maya have become adept farmers and astronomers. The Izapan civilization creates a calendar and writing system and massive pyramids are built.

AD 250–925

The Classic period. It's a time of high society, marked by the invasion of the Teotihuacán, the rise of the Puuc, and the eventual collapse of the Classic Maya and the ascendancy of the Toltec.

925–1530

The Post-Classic period. The bellicose Toltecs of central Mexico establish their domain at Chichén Itzá, then the Itzáes form the League of Mayapán, which dominates politics in northern Yucatán for a couple hundred years.

Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens, by Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, tells in superbly illustrated detail the histories of 11 of the most important Maya city-states and their rulers.

After AD 600, at the height of the Late Classic period, the Maya lands were ruled not as an empire but as a collection of independent, but also interdependent, city-states. Each of these had its noble house, headed by a king who was the social, political and religious focus of the city's life. This ruler propitiated the gods by shedding his blood in ceremonies where he pierced his tongue or penis with a sharp instrument, and led his soldiers into battle against rival cities, capturing prisoners for use in human sacrifices.

Toward the end of the Classic period, the focus of Maya civilization shifted northward to Yucatán, where new nuclei developed at what is now called Chichén Itzá (p186), Uxmal (p167) and Calakmul (p222), giving us the artistic styles known as Puuc, Chenes and Río Bec.

POST-CLASSIC PERIOD

The Toltecs

The collapse of Classic Maya civilization is as surprising as it was sudden. It seems as though the upper classes demanded ever more servants, acolytes and laborers, and though the Maya population was growing rapidly, it did not furnish enough farmers to feed everyone. Thus weakened, the Maya were prey to the next wave of invaders from central Mexico.

In the wake of Teotihuacán's demise, the Toltec people emerged as Mexico's new boss, establishing their capital at Tula (north of present-day Mexico City). According to most historians, a Toltec faction, led by a fair-haired, bearded king named Topiltzin – the self-proclaimed heir to the title of Quetzalcóatl (Plumed Serpent) – was forced to leave its native land by hostile warrior clans. Quetzalcóatl and his followers retreated to the Gulf Coast and sailed eastward to Yucatán, establishing their new base at Uucil-abnal – the land that would be Chichén Itzá. The culture at this Toltec-dominated center flourished after the late 10th century, when all of the great buildings were constructed, but by 1200 the city was abandoned. Many Mexicans believed, however, that the Plumed Serpent king would someday return from the direction of the rising sun to reclaim his domain at Tula.

The Itzáes

Forced by invaders to leave their traditional homeland on the Yucatán's Gulf Coast, a group called the Itzáes headed southeast into northeastern Guatemala. Some continued to Belize, later making their way north along the coast and into northern Yucatán, where they settled at the abandoned Uucil-abnal around AD 1220. The Itzá leader styled himself Kukulcán (the Maya name for Quetzalcóatl), as had the city's Toltec founder, and recycled lots of other Toltec lore as well. The Itzáes strengthened the belief in the sacred nature of cenotes (the natural limestone sinkholes that provided

Check www.sacred-texts.com for good translations of two sacred Maya books, the *Popul Vuh* and *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*.

the Maya with their water supply), and they even named their new home Chichén Itzá (Mouth of the Well of the Itzáes).

From Chichén Itzá, the ruling Itzáes traveled westwards and founded a new capital city at Mayapán, which dominated the political life of northern Yucatán for several hundred years. (For more on the rise of Mayapán, see boxed text, p174.) From Mayapán, the Cocom lineage of the Itzáes ruled a fractious collection of Yucatecan city-states until the mid-15th century, when a subject people from Uxmal, the Xiú, overthrew Cocom power. Mayapán was pillaged, ruined and never repopulated. For the next century, until the coming of the conquistadors, northern Yucatán was alive with battles and power struggles among its city-states.

THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Led by Christopher Columbus, the Spanish arrived in the Caribbean in 1492 and proceeded to seek a westward passage to Asia. They staged exploratory expeditions to the Yucatán in 1517 and 1518, but hostile natives fiercely resisted their attempts to penetrate Mexico's Gulf Coast.

Then Diego Velázquez, the governor of Cuba, asked his ambitious young personal secretary, Hernán Cortés, to lead a new expedition westward. Even though Velázquez subsequently tried to cancel the voyage, Cortés set sail on February 15, 1519, with 11 ships, 550 men and 16 horses.

Landing first at the isle of Cozumel off the Yucatán, the Spaniards were joined by Jerónimo de Aguilar, a Spanish priest who had been shipwrecked there several years earlier. With Aguilar acting as translator and guide, Cortés' force moved west along the coast to Tabasco. After defeating the inhabitants there, the expedition headed inland, winning more battles and some converts to Christianity as it went.

Central Mexico was then dominated by the Aztec empire from its capital of Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City). The Aztecs, like many other cultures in the area, believed that Quetzalcóatl would one day return from the east, according to most historians, and – conveniently for him – Cortés' arrival coincided with their prophecies of the Plumed Serpent's return. The Aztecs allowed the small Spanish force into the capital, perhaps fearful of angering these strangers who might be gods.

By this time thousands of members of the Aztecs' subject peoples had allied with Cortés, eager to throw off the harsh rule imposed by their overlords. Many Aztecs died of smallpox introduced by the Spanish, and by the time they resolved to make war against Cortés and their subjects, they found themselves outnumbered and were defeated, though not without putting up a tremendous fight.

Cortés then conquered central Mexico, after which he turned his attention to the Yucatán.

Back in the 1500s traveling Maya merchants would burn incense nightly on their journeys as an offering for safe passage to the god Ek-chuah.

More than 66.5 million Native Americans died within 150 years of the arrival of Columbus, according to some estimates.

Legend has it that the peninsula got its name when the Spanish conquistadors asked the natives what they called their land. The response was 'Yucatán' – Maya for 'We don't understand you.'

late 15th century

1492

1519–21

1527

1530–1821

1542

The beginning of the end of the Post-Classic period. The decline of the Maya hits full tilt, as fractious city-states replace Mayapán rule. Until the coming of the conquistadors, northern Yucatán is riddled with battles and power struggles.

Spanish arrive in the Caribbean, settling momentarily on Hispanola and Cuba, but it will be several hundred years before they truly 'conquer' the region. European diseases will eventually kill 90% of Native American inhabitants.

Hernán Cortés, first landing on Isla Cozumel, begins making his way along the Gulf Coast toward central Mexico, home of the Aztec empire. He captures the Aztec ruler Moctezuma II and conquers Tenochtitlán.

Francisco de Montejo and his son (the Younger) land in Cozumel and then in Xel-Há with the idea of conquering the region. Eventually they return to Mexico City in defeat.

The *encomienda* system is put in place, basically enslaving the native populations, and friars begin to convert the population in earnest. The Maya blend Christian teachings with their own beliefs, creating a unique belief system.

Francisco de Montejo (the Younger) and his cousin (also a Francisco de Montejo) avenges his father's legacy, establishing the colonial capital at Mérida upon the ruins of the Maya city of T'ho.

CONQUEST & THE COLONIAL PERIOD (1530–1821)

Francisco de Montejo Sr & Jr

Despite political infighting among the Yucatecan Maya, conquest by the Spaniards was not easy. The Spanish monarch commissioned Francisco de Montejo (El Adelantado, or the Pioneer) with the task, and he set out from Spain in 1527 accompanied by his son, also named Francisco de Montejo (El Mozo, or the Lad) and a band of men. Landing first at Cozumel, then at Xel-Há on the mainland, the Montejos discovered that the local people wanted nothing to do with them.

The father-and-son team then sailed around the peninsula, conquered Tabasco (1530) and established their base near Campeche, which could easily be supplied with provisions, arms and troops from central Mexico. They pushed inland to conquer, but after four long, difficult years they were forced to return to Mexico City in defeat.

The younger Montejo took up the cause again, with his father's support, and in 1540 returned to Campeche with his cousin named...Francisco de Montejo. The two Montejos pressed inland with speed and success, allying themselves with the Xiú against the Cocomes, defeating the Cocomes and converting the Xiú to Christianity.

The Montejos founded Mérida in 1542 and within four years subjugated almost all of Yucatán to Spanish rule. The once proud and independent Maya became peons, working for Spanish masters without hope of deliverance except in heaven. The conquerors' attitude toward the indigenous peoples is graphically depicted in the reliefs on the façade of the Montejo mansion in Mérida: in one scene, armor-clad conquistadors are shown with their feet holding down ugly, hairy, club-wielding savages.

The Maya lands were divided into large fiefdoms of sorts, called *encomiendas*, and the Maya living on the lands were mercilessly exploited by the landowning *encomenderos*. 'They inflicted outrageous cruelty on the Indians, cutting off their noses, arms and legs; they cut the breasts off the women and threw them into deep lagoons with gourds tied to their feet,' wrote Friar Diego de Landa in *An Account of the Things of Yucatán*. 'They wounded children with spearthrows because they could not walk as fast as their mothers.'

With the coming of Dominican Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas and groups of Franciscan and Augustinian friars, things improved a little for the Maya. In many cases the clergymen were able to protect the local people from the worst abuses, but exploitation was still the general rule.

INDEPENDENCE FOR SOME

During the colonial period Spain's New World was a highly stratified society. Native Spaniards were at the very top; next were the criollos, people born in the New World of Spanish stock; below them were the mestizos or *ladinos*,

When the indigenous Xiú leader was baptized, he was made to take a Christian name, so he chose what must have appeared to him to be the most popular name of the entire 16th century – and became Francisco de Montejo Xiú.

FRIAR DIEGO DE LANDA

The Maya recorded information about their history, customs and ceremonies in beautifully painted picture books made of beaten-bark paper coated with fine lime plaster. These codices, as they are known, must have numbered in the hundreds when the conquistadors and missionary friars first arrived in the Maya lands. But because the ancient rites of the Maya were seen as a threat to the adoption and retention of Christianity, the priceless books were set aflame upon the orders of the Franciscans. Only four of the painted books survive today, but these provide much insight into ancient Maya life.

Among those Franciscans directly responsible for the burning of the Maya books was the inquisitor Friar Diego de Landa, who, in July of 1562 at Maní (near present-day Ticul), ordered the destruction of 27 'hieroglyphic rolls' and 5000 idols. He also had a few Maya burned to death for good measure.

Though despised by the Maya for destroying their cultural records, it was Friar de Landa who wrote the most important existing book on Maya customs and practices – the source for much of what we know about the Maya. Recalled to Spain for displaying a degree of zeal that even the clerical authorities found unwarranted, he was put on trial for his excesses. He was ordered to jot down everything he knew about the Maya. These scribbles resulted in a book, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (An Account of the Things of Yucatán), which covers virtually every aspect of Maya life as it was in the 1560s, from Maya houses, food, drink, and wedding and funeral customs, to the calendar and the counting system.

people of mixed Spanish and indigenous blood; and at the bottom were the pure-race indigenous people and blacks. Only the native Spaniards had real power – a fact deeply resented by the criollos.

The harshness of Spanish rule resulted in frequent revolts, none of them successful for long. In 1810 the disgruntled criollo priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla delivered his legendary *grito de Dolores*, a cry for independence, from his church near Guanajuato, inciting his parishioners to revolt. With his lieutenant, a mestizo priest named José María Morelos, he brought large areas of central Mexico under his control. But this rebellion, like earlier ones, failed. The power of Spain was too great.

When Napoleon deposed Spain's King Ferdinand VII and put his brother Joseph Bonaparte on the throne of Spain in 1808, criollos in many New World colonies took the opportunity to rise in revolt. By 1821 both Mexico and Guatemala had proclaimed their independence. The state of Yucatán, which at that time encompassed the entire peninsula, joined the Mexican union that same year.

Though independence brought new prosperity to the criollos, it worsened the lot of the Maya. The end of Spanish rule meant that the Crown's few liberal safeguards, which had afforded the Maya minimal protection from the most extreme forms of exploitation, were abandoned. Maya

Of the illustrated Maya books called codices, only four survive to the present day: the Dresden Codex, Madrid Codex, Paris Codex and Grolier Codex.

1562

1810–21

1847–48

1850–93

1876–1911

1901

Franciscan Friar Diego de Landa orders the destruction of 27 codices and more than 5000 idols in Maní, essentially cutting the historic record of the Maya by the root.

The beginning of the War of Independence from Spain. The state of Yucatán joins the newly independent Mexican republic. The Maya remain a subjugated people. Yucatán will declare independence from Mexico in 1841.

The War of the Castes erupts. The Maya are whipped pretty solidly at first, retreating to Quintana Roo. They will continue to revolt for another 100 years, though an official surrender is signed in 1936.

An independent Maya republic is established with its capital at Chan Santa Cruz. The war wages on, with the Maya (getting arms from the British) winning key victories. Britain stops arming the Indians in 1893.

The porfiriato – the name given to the era of Porfirio Díaz' 35-year rule as president-dictator, preceding the Mexican Revolution. Under Díaz, the country is brought into the industrial age.

The Mexican army under Porfirio Díaz recaptures the Maya-controlled territory, executing many Maya leaders and destroying the shrine of the talking cross in Chan Santa Cruz. Guerrilla raids continue for more than 20 years.

claims to ancestral lands were largely ignored and huge plantations were created for the cultivation of tobacco, sugarcane and henequen (a plant yielding rope fiber). The Maya, though legally free, were enslaved by peonage to the great landowners.

The Caste War of Yucatán, by Nelson Reed, is a page-turning account of the modern Maya's insurrection against the criollo elite and the establishment of an independent state.

WAR OF THE CASTES Beginnings

Just 20 years after independence Yucatán's local government voted to break away from the union. Mexican president Santa Anna sent in troops in 1843 but Yucatán's forces managed to stave them off. Economic isolation proved to be a more powerful incentive to return to the fold, however, and a treaty was signed with Mexico that same year. But, charging that Mexico had failed to honor promised treaty concessions, Yucatán again declared independence in 1846.

For the Yucatec Maya, independence from Mexico made little difference – they remained subordinate to a white elite – and insurrection was never far off. In January 1847 indigenous rebels attacked Valladolid, rampaging through the city in an orgy of killing and looting. Now alerted, the Hispanic authorities caught a Maya *batab* (community leader) with a letter detailing a plot to attack the town of Tihosuco (in present-day Quintana Roo). He was shot at Valladolid. Undaunted, the plotters attacked the town of Tepich, south of Tihosuco, killing several criollo families. Thus began the War of the Castes, which the rebels next took to Tihosuco. Supplied with arms and ammunition by the British through Belize, they spread relentlessly across the Yucatán, and in March 1848 the rebels took Valladolid.

In little more than a year, the Maya revolutionaries had driven their oppressors from every part of the Yucatán except Mérida and the walled city of Campeche. But then the rebels suddenly abandoned the attack and went home to plant the corn they would need to carry on the fight. This gave the criollos and mestizos time to regroup. Yucatán's governor appealed to England, Spain and the USA for protection from the indigenous rebels in exchange for annexation to any of those countries. Finally Yucatán rejoined the Mexican union, receiving aid from its former adversary and regaining the upper hand against the insurgents.

REVOLUTION, ROPE & REFORM

Porfirio Díaz, who definitively reclaimed current-day Quintana Roo for Mexico, ruled the country from 1876 to 1911 as a dictator, banning political opposition and free press. During this period, known as the *porfiriato*, Díaz brought the country into the industrial age, and passed laws that created an even larger class of landless peasants and concentrated wealth in the hands of an ever-smaller elite.

One of the forgotten victims of the Caste War is the Maya calendar: shamans were too busy with war to keep track of the days, thus losing count. Luckily, priests in the Guatemalan highlands still maintain an accurate Maya calendar.

THE TALKING CROSS & THE WAR OF THE CASTES

After criollo forces managed to get the upper hand against Maya rebels, the counterattack against the Maya was without quarter and vicious in the extreme. Between 1848 and 1855 the indigenous population of Yucatán was halved. Some Maya combatants sought refuge in the jungles of what is now southern Quintana Roo. There, they were inspired to continue fighting by a religious leader working with a ventriloquist, who, in 1850 at Chan Santa Cruz, made a sacred cross 'talk' (the cross was an important Maya religious symbol long before the coming of Christianity). The talking cross convinced the Maya that their gods had made them invincible, and they continued to fight, overwhelming the Mexican garrison in Bacalar's San Felipe fortress in 1858. By about 1866 the governments in Mexico City and Mérida gave up on the area and the British in Belize recognized the independent Maya republic.

Toward the end of the 19th century, Mexican president Porfirio Díaz launched an assault, sending troops with modern weapons to fight the rebels, who stood in the way of his plans to exploit the region's chicle and hardwoods, and to cultivate sugarcane. In June 1901 the last of the rebel chiefs were taken prisoner in Muylil and executed by firing squad in Xcán. The shrine of the talking cross at Chan Santa Cruz was destroyed, and the town was renamed Felipe Carrillo Puerto. But the local Maya continued to harass and interdict the Mexicans guerrilla-style for decades. An official, negotiated surrender was signed in 1936, but even then many refused to recognize the document signed by representatives they considered traitors. Incidents of resistance, though very few, continued into the 1950s. Today, if you visit Felipe Carrillo Puerto, you can visit the restored shrine of the talking cross (p136) above a dried-up cenote in what is now a city park, though the local Maya are very protective of it.

In the Yucatán, enormous fortunes were made by the owners of haciendas producing henequen, then a lucrative plant for making into rope, twine and other products. (For a description of this spiky plant and its cultivation, see boxed text, p181.)

Díaz was brought down by the Mexican Revolution, which erupted in 1910 and plunged the country into chaos for the next 10 years. In the decades following the revolution, agrarian reforms redistributed much of the peninsula's agricultural land, including many of the haciendas, into the hands of peasant cooperatives called *ejidos*.

THE OIL BOOM & BUST AND RECENT TRENDS

In the 1970s an Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) embargo sent world oil prices soaring, around the same time that vast oil reserves were discovered in the Gulf of Mexico. Suddenly, Mexico became the darling of international investors who loaned the country billions of dollars to fuel an economic boom. With its newly borrowed wealth, the country invested heavily in infrastructure, including the installation of the

1910–20

Almost two million people die and the economy is shattered during the Mexican Revolution. Eventual agrarian reform gives much of the Yucatán back to peasant cooperatives called *ejidos*.

1970s

Mexico experiences an oil boom, and widespread extraction and exploration begins in the Gulf, while environmental problems go widely unchecked. Over in Quintana Roo another boom is taking hold, with the development of Cancún.

1994

The North American Free Trade Agreement comes into effect, and the cultural map of the Yucatán begins to shift. Lured by jobs in *maquiladoras* (for-export factories) and tourist towns like Cancún, peasants begin an exodus from the countryside.

1994

The Zapatista uprising starts in Chiapas when the rebels take over San Cristobal de Las Casas. They later retreat, but continue to fight, declaring their aim of overturning the oligarchy's centuries-old hold on land, resources and power.

2000–1

Vicente Fox of the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN) party is elected president of Mexico, ending seven decades of autocratic rule by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Yucatán follows suit, electing PAN governor Patricio Patrón.

2005

Hurricane Wilma, the largest Atlantic hurricane on record, blows into town. It does widespread damage to the tourist centers of Cancún, Cozumel, Isla Mujeres and Isla Holbox, causing \$520 billion in damage to Cancún alone.

The website of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies (www.famsi.org) contains numerous resources for broadening your understanding of Maya history.

Cantarell complex in the Bay of Campeche, which by 1981 was producing over a million barrels of crude a day.

But just as suddenly a world oil glut caused prices to drop in 1982, leading to a serious debt crisis. As a result, the government restructured the legal framework of the *ejido* system to allow outside investment as well as privatization and sales of cooperative land.

During the 1970s window of prosperity, investment also poured into Quintana Roo for the development of a resort at Cancún, igniting the peninsula's tourism industry and radically transforming the economic panorama. As tourism grew, many of the region's Maya left their villages to find work in Cancún, Cozumel, Playa del Carmen and other tourist haunts, usually as service personnel or in construction. The rise of tourism is thought by many scholars to be the single greatest threat to the culture and language of the Maya.

2006

The PAN party's Felipe Calderón Hinojosa holds off leftist Manuel López Obrador in the 2006 election. The much-disputed results kick off widespread protests, with Obrador going as far as setting up an alternative government.

2007

Hurricane Dean rolls over the peninsula, leveling the Quintana Roo town of Mahahual and causing heavy damage in Chetumal. Over in Tabasco and Chiapas another storm rumbles through, flooding nearly 80% of Tabasco.

2012

The end of the universe. On December 23, 2012, the Maya long-count reaches completion, signaling the end of this universe, according to Maya cosmology.

The Culture

REGIONAL IDENTITY

Culture is an ever-evolving monster, and the regional identity of the Yucatán is arguably changing faster today than it ever has in its history. The erosion of Maya culture, migration to large cities and tourist draws by the landed elite and destitutely poor alike, and the ever-pervasive influence of Mexico's neighbors to the north are morphing and distorting the cultural zeitgeist, creating a new paradigm for a region with a growing identity crisis.

Travelers often comment on the open, gentle and gregarious nature of the people of the Yucatán, especially the Yucatecan Maya. Here more than elsewhere in Mexico, it seems, you find a willingness to converse, a genuine interest in outsiders, while the obsequious attitude often encountered elsewhere in the country is absent. This openness is all the more remarkable when you consider that the people of the Yucatán Peninsula have fended off domination by outsiders for so long – a situation that persists today. The best land is owned or purchased by gringos, *chilangos* (natives of Mexico City) or criollos (people of Spanish descent) and, with few exceptions, those filling the desirable jobs and making infrastructure decisions are not Maya.

And with the tourist industry fast becoming the king-maker in the region, Maya culture seems to evaporate faster and faster as the Maya people abandon their language and traditions (highly rooted in an agrarian way of life) and head to Cancún or Playa del Carmen to work as busboys and waiters, maids and construction workers. But survival has always been at a premium here, and the Maya (and the rest of the region's poor) are finding ways to survive, be it by moving to the US to work, or by simply moving to Mérida to work in the *maquiladoras* (export-only factories paying workers around M\$40 per day) during the week, only making it home to family (the true heart and soul of Mexican culture) on the weekends. This increased isolation from the essential and fundamental Mexican element *la familia* (the family) is leading to increases in modern-day ailments like the dreaded 'Ds': divorce and depression (and maybe even desolation, if we must continue this nasty alliteration).

But beyond this distinct history, and the modern-day challenges facing the region, the people of the Yucatán seem to share many cultural traits with other Mexicans. That is to say, despite the winds of progress and modernization, many of the age-old traditions still remain. Like their compatriots in Oaxaca, Chihuahua or Mexico City, they highly value family bonds, and are only truly themselves within the context of the family. Though they are hard-working people, the people of the region still like to enjoy leisure pursuits to the fullest, and there's never a shortage of fiestas and fun. Yucatecans are also deeply religious, though their faith is a *mélange* of pre-Hispanic beliefs and Catholicism. As elsewhere, traditional gender roles may seem exaggerated to the outsider, though the level of machismo on the peninsula is somewhat less pronounced.

In *The Modern Maya: A Culture in Transition*, Macduff Everton documents this period among the Yucatecan Maya with superb black-and-white photos, while reflecting on the impact of modern influences on this resilient culture.

To learn more about the culture and attractions of Chiapas, head to www.travelchiapas.com.

MIND YOUR MANNERS

Some indigenous people adopt a cool attitude toward visitors: they have come to mistrust outsiders after five centuries of rough treatment. They don't like being gawked at by tourists and can be very sensitive about cameras. Ask first if you have any doubt at all about whether it's OK to take a photo.

LIFESTYLE

Perhaps more than elsewhere in Mexico, ancient rhythms and customs form part of everyday life in the Yucatán. In rural areas this is apparent on the surface level. Women wear colorfully embroidered, loose-fitting *huipiles* (woven tunics) as they slap out tortillas in the yard; people live in traditional oval thatched houses, rest in hammocks after a day's work, and consume a diet of corn, beans and chilies. See 'Understanding the Modern Maya' (p178) and 'Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas' (p244) for more details on the modern indigenous lifestyle.

Various forms of Maya are widely spoken, pre-Hispanic religious rituals are still observed and forms of social organization followed. In some parts of the region, Maya languages prevail over Spanish, or Spanish may not be spoken at all. More than 30 Maya dialects exist, spoken by up to three million people in southern Mexico and northern Central America. Yucatecan Maya is the dialect spoken on the Yucatán Peninsula; some words and phrases appear on p288. Eight Maya languages are spoken in Chiapas. Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Chol are the most widely used, and the latter is believed to most closely resemble the one spoken by the Classic Maya.

Many youngsters are now choosing to leave their rural roots, heading to the *maquiladoras* of Mérida, to the megaresorts of Quintana Roo or even to the US. Rather than study Yucatec, many prefer to learn English. But still, there remains a broad, ubiquitous undercurrent of pride in Maya culture: a hopeful sign that the culture will abide.

POPULATION

For more than a millennium the Maya of the Yucatán have intermarried with neighboring and invading peoples. Most of Mexico's population is mestizo (mixture of indigenous and Spanish blood), but the Yucatán has an especially high proportion of pure-blooded Maya, about four times the national average. There are around 1.5 million Maya in southern Mexico, with about 900,000 Yucatec speakers. Yucatán state, with a 59% Maya population, has the highest percentage of indigenous people of any of Mexico's 31 states.

There are 3.7 million people living in the peninsular states. Quintana Roo is the fastest growing of the three, with a 4.7% growth rate. Campeche and Yucatán ring in with 1.6% growth each.

SPORTS

As elsewhere in Mexico, *fútbol* (soccer) dominates schoolyards and playing fields around the peninsula. Fans are customarily glued to their TV sets to watch televised matches between Mexico's top teams, such as Guadalajara's Chivas or Mexico City's Águilas. The region finally got a first-division team in 2007 when Atlante moved to Cancún. The other 'big' club in the area was

THE BALL GAME

Probably all pre-Hispanic Mexican cultures played some version of the Mesoamerican ritual ball game, the world's first-ever team sport. The game varied from place to place and era to era, but had certain lasting features. Over 500 ball courts have survived at archaeological sites around Mexico and Central America. The game seems to have been played between two teams, and its essence was to keep a rubber ball off the ground by flicking it with hips, thighs, knees or elbows. The vertical or sloping walls alongside the courts were most likely part of the playing area. The game had (at least sometimes) deep religious significance, serving as an oracle, with the result indicating which of two courses of action should be taken. Games could be followed by the sacrifice of one or more of the players – whether winners or losers, no one is sure.

Mesoweb (www.mesoweb.com), Maya Exploration Center (www.mayaexploration.org) and goMaya (www.gomaya.com) are all fabulous resources on the Maya, past and present.

TONGUE TWISTERS: A DIFFICULT DECISION

While Lonely Planet tries its darndest to keep up with linguistic trends, we've decided (purposely) to skip the latest trend in Maya orthography: adding a comma to indicate a glottal stop. The comma was adopted by Maya linguists and historians in 1989 as a vehicle to standardize and legitimize the language. The Maya glottal stop (most often used between two vowels) closely resembles the cockney double 't,' as used in the English pronunciation of bottle. Thus, if we were following the new system, Tikal would be spelled Tik'al, and Chichén Itzá would be spelled Chich'en Itza. It was a tough decision, but in the end we decided to balance out the needs of travelers (signs have yet to be converted to the new orthography) with the need to accurately document language. (See p288 for more on the Maya language.)

the Venados de Mérida, but they moved to Guanajuato back in 2005, leaving the rest of the peninsula with a mix of second- and third-division teams, such as the Itzáes of Yucatán, Inter Playa del Carmen, Mérida FC, Corsarios de Campeche, Huracanes de Cozumel and Club Deportivo de Chetumal. The season is divided into two big tournaments: Torneo de Apertura (August to December) and Torneo de Clausura (January to May). Games are played over the weekend; check newspapers for details.

Béisbol (baseball) is popular in Mexico. The level of professional play is quite high, equivalent at least to AAA ball in the USA. The Mexican League season runs from late March to July; among its teams are the Piratas de Campeche (Campeche Pirates), Olmecas de Tabasco (Tabasco Olmecs) and Leones de Yucatán (Mérida Lions), which won the national championship in 2006.

Yucatecans are also passionate about bullfights and *charreadas* (similar to rodeos). These events are staples of *ferias* (country fairs) around the peninsula.

RELIGION

Among the region's indigenous populations, ancient Maya beliefs blend and mix nearly seamlessly with contemporary Christian traditions, the values and rituals of the two religions being remarkably similar. Mestizos and criollos are more likely to follow strict Catholic doctrine. And here, like nearly everywhere else in Latin America, Catholicism is fast losing ground to evangelical sects.

The Ancient Maya WORLD-TREE & XIBALBÁ

For the Maya, the world, the heavens and the mysterious 'unseen world' or underworld, called Xibalbá (shi-bahl-*bah*), were all one great, unified structure that operated according to laws of astrology and ancestor worship. The towering ceiba tree was considered sacred. It symbolized the Wakah-Chan (Yaxché, or World-Tree), which united the 13 heavens, the surface of the earth and the nine levels of the underworld of Xibalbá. The World-Tree had a sort of cruciform shape and was associated with the color blue-green. In the 16th century the Franciscan friars required the indigenous population to venerate the cross; this Christian symbolism meshed easily with established Maya beliefs.

POINTS OF THE COMPASS

In Maya cosmology, each point of the compass had special religious significance. East was most important, as it was where the sun was reborn each day; its color was red. West was black because it was where the sun disappeared.

Mexico Online (www.mexonline.com) has good history and culture links, and lots of other information.

Crosses adorned with *huipiles* (woven tunics) are found throughout the peninsula, and are often associated with the cult of the speaking cross.

In a visit to the church at the Tzotzil village of San Juan Chamula, you may see chanting *curanderos* (healers) carrying out shamanic rites.

Lavishly illustrated with sections of friezes, sculpted figurines, and painted pottery and other fine specimens of Maya art, *The Blood of Kings*, by Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, deciphers glyphs and pictographs on these objects to elicit recurring themes of Classic Maya civilization.

The Maya developed two separate calendars (see boxed text, opposite), one of 260 days, the second a 365-day cycle that corresponds to the solar year. The two cycles match up every 52 years, a period referred to as the Long Count.

North was white and was the direction from which the all-important rains came, beginning in May. South was yellow because it was the sunniest point of the compass.

Everything in the Maya world was seen in relation to these cardinal points, with the World-Tree at the center, and they were the base for the all-important astronomical and astrological observations that determined fate.

BLOODLETTING

Just as the great cosmic dragon shed its blood, which fell to the earth as rain, so humans had to shed blood to link themselves with Xibalbá.

As illustrated in various Maya stone carvings and painted pottery, the nobility customarily drew their own blood on special occasions, such as royal births or deaths, crop plantings, victories on the battlefield or accession to the throne. Blood represented royal lineage (as it does in other societies), and so the blood of kings granted legitimacy to these events. Often using the spine of a manta ray as a lancet, a noble would pierce his cheek, lower lip, tongue or genitalia and pull a piece of rope or straw through the resulting orifice to extract the sacred substance. Performed for lower-ranking members of the nobility or occasionally before dumbstruck commoners, the excruciating ritual served not only to sanctify the event but to appease the gods, as well as to communicate with them through the hallucinogenic visions that often resulted from such self-mutilation.

When the Christian friars said that the blood of Jesus had been spilled for the common people, the Maya could easily understand the symbolism.

SACRED PLACES

Maya ceremonies were performed in natural sacred places as well as in their man-made equivalents. Mountains, caves, lakes, cenotes (limestone sinkholes), rivers and fields were all sacred, and had special importance in the scheme of things. Pyramids and temples were thought of as stylized mountains; sometimes they had secret chambers within them, like the caves in a mountain. A cave was the mouth of the creature that represented Xibalbá, and to enter it was to enter the spirit of the secret world. This is why some Maya temples have doorways surrounded by huge masks: as you enter the door of this 'cave,' you are entering the mouth of Xibalbá.

The plazas around which the pyramids were placed symbolized the open fields or the flat land of the tropical forest. What we call stelae were to the Maya 'tree-stones'; that is, tree-effigies echoing the sacredness of the World-Tree. These tree-stones were often carved with the figures of great Maya kings, for the king was the World-Tree of Maya society.

As these places were sacred, it made sense for succeeding Maya kings to build new and ever grander temples directly over older temples, enhancing

SWEATING OUT THOSE EVIL SPIRITS IN A MAYA TEMESCAL

The sweat lodge has always been a cornerstone of indigenous American spiritual life. The Maya, like their brothers to the north, were no different, using the *temescal* for both ceremonial and curative purposes.

The word *temescal* derives from the Aztec word *teme* (to bathe) and *calli* (house). The Maya people used these bathhouses not just to keep clean, but also to heal any number of ailments. Most scholars say they were most likely used during childbirth as well. Large bath complexes have been discovered at several Maya archaeological sites. Ironically, the hygienically suspect conquistadors considered the *temescal*s dirty places and strongholds of sin. To this day, they are used by the Maya (and tourists) to bathe and keep those evil spirits away.

THE CELESTIAL PLAN

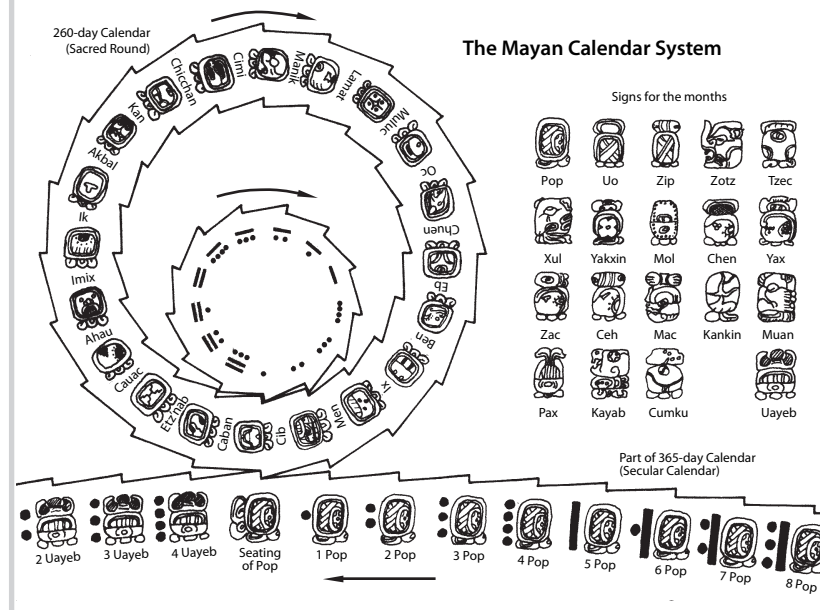
The ancient Maya were essentially spiritual timekeepers, counting the ticks of the day as they moved toward the end of the universe on December 23, 2012. Every major work of Maya architecture had a celestial plan. Temples were aligned so as to enhance celestial observation of the sun, moon, certain stars or planets, especially Venus. The alignment might not be apparent except at certain conjunctions of the celestial bodies (eg an eclipse), but the Maya knew each building was properly 'placed' and that this enhanced its sacred character.

Temples usually had other features that linked them to the stars. The doors and windows might frame a celestial body at an exact point in its course on a certain day of a certain year. This is the case with the Palacio del Gobernador (Governor's Palace) at Uxmal, which is aligned in such a way that, from the main doorway, Venus would have been visible exactly on top of a small mound some 3.5km away, in the year AD 750. At Chichén Itzá, the observatory building called El Caracol was aligned in order to sight Venus exactly in the year AD 1000.

Furthermore, the main door to a temple might be decorated to resemble a huge mouth, signifying entry to Xibalbá (the secret world or underworld; p41). Other features might relate to the numbers of the calendar round, as at Chichén Itzá's El Castillo. This pyramid has 364 stairs to the top; with the top platform, this makes 365, the number of days in the Maya vague year. (The vague year corresponds to our 365-day solar year, with the difference that it is not adjusted every four years by adding an additional day. Therefore, the seasons do not occur at the same time each year but vary slightly from year to year. For that reason, the Maya solar year is characterized as 'vague.')

On the sides of the pyramid are 52 panels, signifying the 52-year cycle of the calendar round. The terraces on each side of each stairway total 18 (nine on either side), signifying the 18 'months' of the solar vague year. The alignment of El Castillo catches the sun and makes a shadow of the sacred sky-serpent ascending or descending the side of El Castillo's staircase on the vernal and autumnal equinoxes (March 20 to 21 and September 21 to 22) each year.

As the Maya civilization flourished, more elaborate temples were built atop smaller, older ones (see opposite).



the sacred character of the spot. The temple being covered over was preserved as it remained a sacred artifact. Certain features of these older temples, such as the large masks on the façades, were carefully padded and protected before the new construction was placed over them.

Ancestor worship and genealogy were very important to the Maya, and when they buried a king beneath a pyramid, or a commoner beneath the floor or courtyard of his or her *na* (thatched Maya hut), the sacredness of the location was increased.

ANIMISM & CATHOLICISM

The ceiba tree's cruciform shape was not the only correspondence the Maya found between their animist beliefs and Christianity. Both traditional Maya animism and Catholicism have rites of baptism and confession, days of fasting and other forms of abstinence, religious partaking of alcoholic beverages, burning of incense and the use of altars.

Contemporary Yucatecans

Today's Maya identify themselves as Catholic but they practice a Catholicism that is a fusion of shamanist-animist and Christian ritual. The traditional religious ways are so important that often a Maya will try to recover from a malady by seeking the advice of a religious shaman rather than a medical doctor. Use of folk remedies linked with animist tradition is widespread in Maya areas.

Roman Catholicism accounts for the religious orientation of around 80% of contemporary Yucatecans, while 11% of the Yucatán's population identifies themselves as Protestants or evangelicals. Congregations affiliated with churches such as the Assemblies of God, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses can also be found in the Yucatán.

ARTS

The Yucatán's arts and crafts scene is enormously rich and varied. The influence of the Maya or Spanish cultures (or both) appears in almost every facet of Yucatecan art, from their dance and music to the clothes and hats they wear.

Pre-Hispanic Art

The Classic Maya, at their cultural height from about AD 300 to 900, were perhaps ancient Mexico's most artistic people. They left countless beautiful stone sculptures, of complicated design and meaning but possessing an easily appreciated delicacy of touch – a talent also expressed in their unique architecture. Subjects are typically rulers, deities and significant events.

Literature

Yucatán's earliest known literary work is the *Books of the Chilam Balam of Chumayel*. Written in Maya after the conquest, it is a compendium of Maya history, prophecy and mythology collected by priests from the northern Yucatán town of Chumayel.

Diego de Landa, the Spanish friar (see boxed text, p35), could be said to have produced the first literary work in Spanish from the Yucatán, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (An Account of the Things of Yucatán), in which he relates his biased perception of the Maya's ceremonial festivals, daily life and traditions, even as he engineered their eradication.

Ixchel, the moon goddess, was the principal female deity of the Maya pantheon. Today she is linked with the Virgin Mary.

Ah Tz'ib are the Maya scribes that wrote the sacred texts of the Maya, including the *Chilam Balam*. H-menob (shamans) and Ah Tz'ib still practice their craft throughout the peninsula.

Viva Zapata! (1952) stars Anthony Quinn and Marlon Brando, and traces the story of the Mexican Revolution. Quinn won an Oscar for his supporting role, while Brando, though nominated, was left out in the cold.

THE MAYA 'BIBLE': UNRAVELING THE SECRETS OF THE POPOL VUH

The history, prophesies, legends and religious rites of the Maya were preserved on painted codices and through oral traditions. Nearly all of these codices were destroyed during the time of the conquest (only four survive today), effectively cutting the historic record of the Maya. Lucky for Mayanologists, the *Popul Vuh*, known to many as the Maya Bible, recaptured these myths and sacred stories.

The *Popul Vuh* is said to be written by the Quiché Maya of Guatemala, who had learned Spanish and the Latin alphabet from the Dominican friars – the text was written in Latin characters rather than hieroglyphics. The authors showed their book to Francisco Ximénez, a Dominican who lived and worked in Chichicastenango, in Guatemala, from 1701 to 1703. Friar Ximénez copied the Maya book word for word and then translated it into Spanish. Both his copy and the Spanish translation survive, but the original has been lost.

According to the *Popul Vuh*, the great god K'ucumatz created humankind first from mud. But these 'earthlings' were weak and dissolved in water, so K'ucumatz tried again using wood. The wood people had no hearts or minds and could not praise their creator, so they were destroyed, all except the monkeys who lived in the forest, who are the descendants of the wood people. The creator tried once again, this time successfully, using substances recommended by four animals – the gray fox, the coyote, the parrot and the crow. White and yellow corn were ground into meal to form the flesh, and stirred into water to make the blood.

The *Popul Vuh* legends include some elements that made it easier for the Maya to understand certain aspects of Christian belief, including virgin birth and sacrificial death followed by resurrection.

Aside from (unsuccessfully) seeking US intervention against the Maya during the War of the Castes, Justo Sierra O'Reilly is credited with writing what is possibly the first Mexican novel, *La Hija del Judío*. About the ill-fated romance of a Jewish merchant's daughter in colonial Mexico, this superior work of fiction was originally published during the 1840s as a series in Sierra's Campeche newspaper, *El Fénix*, and later published in its entirety.

In more recent times the Yucatecan author Ermilio Abreu Gómez synthesized the peninsula's Maya heritage in fictional works like the novel *Canek: History and Legend of a Maya Hero*, the story of an indigenous laborer's struggle against injustice.

Novelist, playwright and art critic Juan García Ponce, who died in 2003, is perhaps the Yucatán's best-known modern literary figure. *Imagen Primera* (First Image) and *La Noche* (The Night), collections of his short stories, make good starting points for exploring the Mérida-born writer's prolific output.

Music

Two styles of music are traditionally associated with the Yucatán: the *jarana* (p46) and *trova yucateca*.

A type of festive dance music, a *jarana* is generally performed by a large ensemble consisting of two trumpets, two clarinets, one trombone, a tenor sax, timbales and a guiro (percussion instrument made from a grooved gourd). The music pauses for the singers to deliver *bombas* – ad-libbed verses, usually with a humorous double meaning, that are aimed at the object of their affections. A *jarana* orchestra always ends its performances with the traditional *torito*, a vivacious song that evokes the fervor of a bullfight.

A hybrid of Cuban, Spanish, Colombian and homegrown influences, the Yucatecan *trova* is a catchall term for romantic ballads, Cuban claves, tangos, boleros, Yucatecan folk songs and other tunes that can be strummed on a guitar by a *trovador* (troubador). The style is often played by the guitar trios who roam the squares of Mérida, seeking an audience to serenade.

Mel Gibson's Oscar-nominated *Apocalypto* hit theaters in 2006, and was the first major Yucatec-Maya-language film ever. It was filmed mostly in Veracruz.

Guty Cárdenas, un Siglo del Ruiseñor, produced by the prestigious Mexican record label Discos Corasón (www.corason.com), includes a CD and DVD covering the musical career of this seminal Yucatecan composer/performer.

(The usual serenade consists of five songs.) In any discussion of the *trova*, you're likely to hear the name Guty Cárdenas, nicknamed the 'Yucatecan nightingale.' Cárdenas only recorded for five years during the 1920s, but he's been remarkably influential. In a *trova*, as with *jaranas*, the subject matter is usually a suitor's paean of love to an unattainable sweetheart. March brings the Festival de Trova Yucateca to Mérida.

A more contemporary figure of Yucatecan song is Armando Manzanero, the singer and composer from Mérida. Though Manzanero speaks to an older generation, his songs are still being covered by contemporary pop stars like Luis Miguel and Alejandro Sanz. He is best known for heart-wrenching boleros, such as 'Adoro,' 'Te Extranó,' 'Contigo Aprendí' and 'Somos Novios' (a tune that English speakers are more likely to know as 'It's Impossible'), many of which have taken their place in the canon of Mexican standards.

Dance

The Spanish influence on Maya culture is abundantly evident in the *jarana*, a dance Yucatecans have been performing for centuries. The dance bears more than a passing resemblance to the *jota*, performed in Spain's Alto Aragón region. The movements of the dancers, with their torsos held rigid and a formal distance separating men from women, are nearly identical; however, whereas the Spanish punctuate elegant turns of their wrists with clicks of their castanets, Maya women snap their fingers.

The best place to see dancers perform to the accompaniment of *jarana* is at *vaquerías* – homegrown fiestas held in the atriums of town halls or on haciendas. The women wear their best embroidered *huipiles*, flowers in their hair and white heels; men wear a simple, white cotton outfit with a red bandanna tucked into the waist. In Mérida, *vaquerías* are held weekly in the Plaza de Santa Lucia.

Handicrafts

TEXTILES

Women throughout the Yucatán Peninsula traditionally wear straight, white cotton dresses called *huipiles*, the bodices of which are always embroidered. The tunic generally falls to just below the knee; on formal occasions it is worn with a lacy white underskirt that reaches the ankle. The *huipil* never has a belt, which would defeat its airy, cool design. Light, loose fitting and traditionally made of cotton (synthetics are occasionally used today), these garments are ideally suited for the tropics. Maya women have been wearing *huipiles* for centuries.

Also commonly worn on the peninsula (and similar to the *huipil* in appearance) is the *gala terno*, which is a straight, white, square-necked dress with an embroidered overyoque and hem, worn over an underskirt that sports an embroidered strip near the bottom. It is fancier than a *huipil* and is often accompanied by a delicately hand-knitted shawl.

In addition to *huipiles*, *galas ternos* and shawls, Maya women throughout the peninsula are known for weaving lovely sashes, tablecloths and napkins.

PANAMA HATS

The classic woven straw hat that most people associate with Panama was made internationally famous in the late 19th century by Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of the Suez Canal and the brains behind the failed French attempt to build a canal in Panama.

The much-photographed Lesseps was balding when he arrived in Panama, and he found that the light but durable hat provided excellent protection

against the sun. Most newspaper photographs taken of him showed the larger-than-life figure looking even worldlier in his exotic headgear. Soon men around the globe began placing orders for the 'panama hat.'

Panama hats originated in Ecuador and were exported to Panama. However, at least as early as the 1880s, residents of Bécál in the Mexican state of Campeche were producing the same style hat. Today more than a thousand people in the small, quiet town of Bécál are still making the hats, which they variously call *panamás* or *jipijapas* (see p214 for details on how the hats are made).

WOODEN CRAFTS

In handicrafts shops across the peninsula, you'll come across beautiful wooden crafts, such as carved wooden panels and galleons.

The ancient Maya made woodcarvings of their many gods, just as they carved the images of their deities in stone. The skill and techniques associated with the artistry survive to this day. The wooden panels are often a meter or more in height and feature a strange-looking character of unmistakably Maya imagination – the image will resemble figures you've seen at Maya ruins. If the carved image is one of a heavily adorned man raising a chalice, most likely you're looking at a representation of Itzamná, lord of the heavens; he's a popular figure on the wooden panels of contemporary Maya.

The Maya – so impressed with the Spanish galleons that arrived on their shores that they made meter-long models of the ships, complete with tiny sails – have been making wooden galleons for generations. Today the galleons that used to haul cargoes of hardwood back to Europe are gone, but the craft of galleon model-making is alive and well in the Yucatán. Campeche is the state most associated with such items, but they are made by accomplished artisans in the states of Yucatán and Quintana Roo as well.

Architecture

Maya architecture is amazing for its achievements but perhaps even more amazing for what it did not achieve. Maya architects never seem to have used the true arch (a rounded arch with a keystone), and never thought to put wheels on boxes for use as wagons to move the thousands of tons of construction materials needed in their tasks. They had no metal tools – they were technically a Stone Age culture – yet could build breathtaking temple complexes and align them so precisely that windows and doors were used as celestial observatories with great accuracy.

The arch used in most Maya buildings is the corbeled arch (or, when used for an entire room rather than a doorway, corbeled vault). In this technique, large flat stones on either side of the opening are set progressively inward as they rise. The two sides nearly meet at the top, and this 'arch' is then topped by capstones. Though they served the purpose, the corbeled arches severely limited the amount of open space beneath them. In effect, Maya architects were limited to long, narrow vaulted rooms.

The Maya also lacked draft animals (horses, donkeys, mules or oxen). All the work had to be done by humans, on their feet, with their arms and backs, without wagons or even wheelbarrows.

MAYA ARCHITECTURE

Maya architecture's 1500-year history saw a fascinating progression of styles. Styles changed not just with the times, but with the particular geographic area of Mesoamerica in which the architects worked. Not all of the styles can be seen in the Yucatán.

Chloe Sayer's fascinating *Arts and Crafts of Mexico* traces the evolution of crafts from pre-Hispanic times to the present, with many fine photos.

The Crafts of Mexico is a gorgeously illustrated coffee-table volume focusing on ceramics and textiles, by Margarita de Orellana and Albertio Ruy Sánchez, editors of the superb magazine *Artes de México*.

Maya pyramids were painted in brilliant red, green, yellow and white colors. And the people of the region often painted their bodies red.

Late Pre-Classic (100 BC to AD 250)

This style is perhaps best exhibited at Uaxactún, north of Tikal in Guatemala's Petén department. Uaxactún's Pyramid E-VII-sub is a fine example of how the architects of what is known as the Chicanel culture designed their pyramid-temples in the time around this period. It's a square stepped-platform pyramid with central stairways on each of the four sides, each stairway flanked by large jaguar masks. The entire platform was covered in a fine white stucco. The top platform is flat and probably bore a temple *na* (hut) made of wooden poles topped with a palm thatch. This temple is well preserved because others had been built on top of it; the later structures fell into ruin and were cleared away to reveal E-VII-sub. Similar Chicanel-style temples were also built at Tikal, El Mirador and Lamanai (in Belize).

Early Classic (AD 300–600)

The Esperanza culture typifies this phase. In Esperanza-style temples, the king was buried in a wooden chamber beneath the main staircase of the temple; successive kings were buried in similar positions in pyramids built on top of the original.

Of the surviving early Classic pyramids, perhaps the best example is the step-pyramid at Acanceh, just south of Mérida.

Late Classic (AD 600–900)

The most important Classic sites flourished during the latter part of the period. By this time the Maya temple pyramid had a stone building on top, replacing the *na* of wooden poles and thatch. Numbers of pyramids were built close together, sometimes forming contiguous or even continuous structures. Near them, different structures now called palaces were built; they sat on lower platforms and held many more rooms, perhaps a dozen or more.

In addition to pyramids and palaces, Classic sites have carved stelae and round 'altar-stones' set in the plaza in front of the pyramids. Another feature of the Classic and later periods is the ball court, with the sloping playing surfaces of stone covered in stucco.

Of all the Classic sites, Tikal in Guatemala is the grandest restored so far. Here the pyramids reached their most impressive heights and were topped by superstructures (called roofcombs by archaeologists) that made them even taller. As in earlier times these monumental structures were used as the burial places of kings.

Puuc, Chenes & Río Bec (AD 600–800)

Among the most distinctive of the Late Classic Maya architectural styles are those that flourished in the western and southern regions of the Yucatán Peninsula. These styles valued exuberant display and architectural bravado more than they did proportion and harmony – think of it as Maya baroque.

The Puuc style, named for the hills surrounding Uxmal, used facings of thin limestone 'tiles' to cover the rough stone walls of buildings. The tiles were worked into geometric designs and stylized figures of monsters and serpents. Minoan-style columns and rows of engaged columns (half-round cylinders partly embedded in a wall) were also a feature of the style; they were used to good effect on façades of buildings at Uxmal and at the Puuc sites of Kabah, Sayil, Xlapak and Labná. Puuc architects were crazy about Chac, the rain god, and stuck his grotesque face on every temple. At Kabah, the façade of the Palacio de los Mascarones (Palace of the Masks) is covered in Chac masks.

The Chenes style, prevalent in areas of Campeche south of the Puuc region, is similar to the Puuc style, but Chenes architects seem to have enjoyed putting huge masks as well as smaller ones on their façades.

Joyce Kelly's *An Archaeological Guide to Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula* gives visitors both practical and background information on 91 sites.

The Río Bec style, epitomized in the richly decorated temples at the archaeological sites between Escárcega and Chetumal, used lavish decoration, as in the Puuc and Chenes styles, but added huge towers to the corners of its low buildings, just for show. Río Bec buildings look like a combination of the Governor's Palace of Uxmal and Temple I at Tikal.

Early Post-Classic (AD 1000–1250)

The collapse of Classic Maya civilization around AD 1000 created a power vacuum that was filled by the invasion of the Toltecs from central Mexico. The Toltecs brought with them their own architectural ideas, and in the process of conquest these ideas were assimilated and merged with those of the Puuc style.

The foremost example of what might be called the Toltec-Maya style is Chichén Itzá. Elements of Puuc style – the large masks and decorative friezes – coexist with Toltec warrior atlantes (male figures used as supporting columns) and *chac-mools*, odd reclining statues that are purely Toltec and have nothing to do with Maya art. Platform pyramids with broad bases and spacious top platforms, such as the Templo de los Guerreros (Temple of the Warriors), look as though they might have been imported from the ancient Toltec capital of Tula (near Mexico City) or by way of Teotihuacán, with its broad-based pyramids of the sun and moon. Because Quetzalcóatl was so important to the Toltecs, feathered serpents are used extensively as architectural decoration.

Late Post-Classic (AD 1250–1519)

After the Toltecs came the Cocomes, who established their capital at Mayapán, south of Mérida, and ruled a confederation of Yucatecan states during this period. After the golden age of Tikal and Palenque, even after the martial architecture of Chichén Itzá, the architecture of Mayapán is a disappointment. The pyramids and temples are small and crude compared with the glorious Classic structures. Mayapán's only architectural distinction comes from its vast defensive city wall, one of the few such walls ever discovered in a Maya city. The fact that the wall exists testifies to the weakness of the Cocom rulers and the unhappiness of their subject peoples.

Tulum, another walled city, is also a product of this time. The columns of the Puuc style are used here, and the painted decoration on the temples must have been colorful. But there is nothing here to rival Classic architecture.

Cobá has the finest architecture of this otherwise decadent period. The stately pyramids here had new little temples built atop them in the style of Tulum.

SPANISH COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE

The conquistadors and Franciscan and Dominican priests brought with them the architecture of their native Spain and adapted it to the conditions they met in the Maya lands. Churches in the largest cities were decorated with baroque elements, but in general the churches are simple and fortress-like. The exploitation of the Maya by the Spaniards led to frequent rebellions, and the high stone walls of the churches worked well in protecting the upper classes from the wrath of the indigenous people.

As you travel through the region, you'll see that many churches are plain, both inside and out. These crude and simple borrowings from Spanish architecture are eclipsed by the richness of the religious pageantry that takes place inside the buildings – including many half-Maya, half-Catholic processions, rituals, decorations and costumes.

The Art of Mesoamerica by Mary Ellen Miller is an excellent overview of pre-Hispanic art and architecture.

Food & Drink

Mauricio Velázquez de León

I hope you're hungry because in the Yucatán Peninsula you are up for a feast. Yucatecos, and other residents of the Yucatán Peninsula, are enormously proud of their history and cultural background, and they will love to share it with you in the form of a rich-red plate of *cochinita pibil* (pork pibil style), a couple of *panuchos* (small corn tortillas that puff when heated) and a sip of Xtabentún, the so-called liqueur of the gods. The relative geographic isolation from the rest of the country together with a strong Mayan influence have made *la cocina yucateca* the Mexican regional cuisine with the most distinctive personality, and as you travel around the region you will find a cuisine based on ingredients and techniques unheard of anywhere else in Mexico. At first some dishes will resemble specialties that you can find elsewhere in the country, such as tacos or tamales, but soon you will discover that in the Yucatecan kitchen these Mexican-food staples have been transformed with a Mayan and Caribbean flair. Travel further to the south and you'll cross another cultural milestone, where the indigenous population in Chiapas preserves yet a different culinary tradition.

There is a big chance that you landed in this region seduced by the white beaches and crystal-clear waters of Cancún or Playa del Carmen, or to marvel at the architectural and artistic achievements of the Classic Mayan period in ancient cities like Tulum, Uxmal or Chichén Itzá, and there is a reasonable chance that you will find places to eat good, and even great, Yucatecan cuisine in these locations. But if you are determined to embark on a serious culinary escapade, then you have to visit towns like Valladolid, Motul, Campeche, Izamal, Chetumal or Mérida, the peninsula's eating capital.

STAPLES & SPECIALTIES

The staples of Mexican food – corn, and an array of dry and fresh chilies and beans – are also basic ingredients on the Yucatecan table. Achiote (the seeds from the annatto flower), epazote (a herb called pigweed or Jerusalem oak in the US), *chaya* (a shrub also known as tree spinach), *cat* (a variety of cucumber) and the habanero chili are some regional ingredients. Together with *recados* (local rubs; see boxed text, opposite), these are the building blocks of *la cocina yucateca*.

In the Yucatán Peninsula you will find an array of typical *antojitos* using corn as the base. The word *antojitos* translates as 'little whims, a sudden craving.' But as any Mexican will quickly point out, it is not just a snack. They are more like the Spanish tapas. You can have an entire meal of *antojitos*, or have a couple as appetizers, or yes, eat one as a *tentempié* (quick bite) before hopping on the bus or while standing outside a bar. A classic Yucatecan *antojito* is *panuchos*. Cooks slit the thin layer of the tortilla and spread beans and a slice of hard-boiled egg inside. Lightly fried, it is then topped with meat or shredded poultry or *cazón* (dogfish) and pickled red onions. In Mayan, *kots'* refer to small stuffed *taquitos*, and that is exactly what *codzitos* are: small fried tacos filled with minced pork and topped with tomato sauce. *Papadzules* are tortillas bathed in a pumpkin-seed sauce, filled with chopped hard-boiled eggs and topped with some drops of pumpkin-seed oil. The peninsula is also distinguished for its variety of tamales. Tamales are made with masa mixed with lard, stuffed with stewed meat, fish or vegetables, wrapped and steamed. The word comes from the Nahuatl word *tamalli* and refers to anything wrapped up. *Tamalitos al vapor* are small tamales filled with pork meat and a sauce made with tomatoes, epazote and achiote, and wrapped

A regular Monday dish in most Yucatecan homes is *frijol con puerco*, a Yucatecan version of pork and beans. Pork cooked with black beans is served with rice, and garnished with radish, cilantro (coriander) and onions.

RECADOS

Recado is the generic name used for the local rubs or marinades that combine dry chilies, spices, herbs and vinegar, and are applied to meats and poultry. The Mayan called the *recados* 'kuux,' and they are essential to preparing an array of dishes on the peninsula. Not so long ago you could find *recaderías* (spice-paste stores) in most towns and cities. Today this name is only used to designate some market stalls dedicated to selling spices and dry chilies. Some popular *recados* are *recado blanco* (white), which contains oregano, garlic, cloves, cinnamon, salt, pepper and sour oranges. It's also known as *recado de puchero* because it is used for cooking *puchero*, a hearty stew of beef or chicken, with chayote, zucchini, sweet potatoes and chickpeas. *Recado negro* (black) contains corn tortillas and local chilies that are burned (hence the color) with an array of spices. It's the foundation of one of the region's classic dishes *relleno negro*, turkey stuffed with minced pork, dry fruits, tomatoes and epazote, and rubbed with this kind of *recado*. But the most famous *recado* is *recado rojo* (red), containing black and red pepper, oregano, cloves, cinnamon, salt, water and the achiote (annatto) seeds that infuse an intense red color and flavor to *cochinita pibil* (pork pibil style) and other regional favorites. *Recado rojo* is sometimes simply called achiote, but this refers to the prepared paste and not to the achiote flower.

in banana leaves. *El tamal de boda* is made only during weddings, and the *muc bil pollo* is a tamale prepared traditionally during Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead; see Celebrations, p53). *El brazo de indio* (Indian arm) is a large tamale that can be 28cm long and 10cm wide. It is made by rolling layers of masa and *chaya* leaves.

In the Yucatán some dishes have taken the name of the cities and towns where they were created. Motul is the birthplace of *huevos motuleños*, the famous pair of fried eggs topping a tortilla with beans and covered with a tomato sauce, chopped cheese and ham, and green peas. The *longaniza de valladolid* is a chorizo sausage that has been smoked for up to 12 hours, and the *pollo ticuleño* was born in the city of Ticul. The chicken is rubbed with *recado rojo* and cooked with green peas and *chile dulce* (a local pepper that has no heat). It's served with pickled chilies, potatoes and plantains.

But by far, *cochinita pibil* is the region's most famous dish. In Mayan *pib* means a hole in the ground, and cooking '*al pibil*' is a technique that has been used for centuries in this region to cook all kinds of marinated and nonmarinated meats. Originally it was cooked using venison and it was known as *pibil keh*. Today *lechón* (piglet) is the meat of choice, hence the name *cochinita*, meaning little pig, although many places use meat from adult pigs. It's prepared by rubbing the meat with *recado rojo* that has been thinned using the juice of sour oranges. The meat is then wrapped in banana leaves and cooked underground for as many as eight hours. Most places cook their *cochinita* in traditional ovens, with very good results. It is usually served shredded and topped with red onions that have been pickled with orange juice, vinegar and a dash of sugar. You can make *tacos de cochinita pibil* with corn tortillas or even use it as a filling for *tortas* (sandwiches using *bolillo*, a bread that resembles a French roll). Another popular dish using *recado rojo* is *pavo en escabeche*, where turkey is marinated in the *recado*, then simmered in water and roasted *xcatic chile* (a mild local chili similar to Hungarian wax pepper), and then grilled before serving. *Caldo de pavo* (turkey soup) is also popular in the region, but *sopa de lima* is the favorite Yucatecan soup. This is a local version of chicken soup using tomatoes, *chile dulce*, chopped onion, strips of lightly fried tortillas and lime.

With the Caribbean Sea to the east, the Gulf of Mexico to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the south, you can expect an incredible array of fish and seafood dishes in the Yucatán Peninsula. *Mariscos* (shellfish) and *pescado*

The strongest demand for habanero chili grown in Yucatán comes from Japan. Japanese companies normally buy the chili in its powder form and add it to a wide variety of spicy snacks.

(fish) are prepared *a la ajillo* (in garlic and *guajillo* chili sauce), *a la plancha* (grilled) or *a la diablo* (with garlic, tomato and *cascabel chile*, a dry moderately hot chili that has a brownish color). Achiote is also used in dishes like *pampano empapelado* (marinated and paper-wrapped pompano), and *tikin-xit*, fish wrapped in banana leaves and grilled, is a local favorite. Crab is famous in the coastal lagoons of the Gulf, such as Celestún and Laguna de Términos, and is served in many forms, especially in *chilpachole* (crab soup with epazote, tomatoes and *chile chipotle* – dried, smoked, jalapenos with a smoky, meaty flavor and moderate heat). In Chiapas *bosto de sardina* (grilled sardines wrapped in banana leaves) is a well-known dish.

DRINKS

Like elsewhere in Mexico, on the peninsula you will find the popular tequila and its cousin mescal. Both spirits are distilled from the agave plant, but the difference is that tequila has to come from blue agave in the central state of Jalisco, and is protected with a Designation of Origin (DO) by the Consejo Regulador del Tequila (the Tequila Regulate Council). Cerveza (beer) is also widely available, and although you can find all national brands, such as Corona and Dos Equis, two local beers stand out: the lager Montejo and the dark León Negra. The practice of a beer served with a wedge of lime in its mouth is not as common in Mexico as it is in foreign bars, and you will find that establishments that serve lime with your beer would most likely offer it on a small plate.

Balché is a Mayan spirit that was offered to the gods during special ceremonies. It is fermented inside the hollow trunk of the *balché* tree with water and honey. In Valladolid, during indigenous weddings, the bride is sprayed with *balché* as a sign of abundance. *Balché* is not commercially available, but another Mayan spirit, *xtabentún*, is easy to find in the region. *Xtabentún* is an anise-flavored liqueur that, when authentic, is made by fermenting honey.

Nonalcoholic

The great variety of fruits, plants and herbs that grow in the Yucatán Peninsula are a perfect fit for the kind of nonalcoholic drinks Mexicans love. *Juguerías*

H IS FOR HOT, HABANERO AND HELP!

That's right, the habanero, the hottest chili grown on our planet, finds its home in Yucatán, and it is a foundation of its cuisine. Does this mean that everything you're going to eat will burn your mouth? Well, no. Despite the fierce reputation of the habanero chili, Yucatecan food is not spicy. The habanero is most commonly found in table salsas, and it is up to you how much to add to the dish. The habanero grown in Yucatán has an international reputation for being a high-quality pepper with a bright-orange color, and the highest number of Scoville Heat Units found in any pepper.

This method, developed by American scientist Wilbur Scoville to measure the piquancy in chilies, quantifies the amount of the chemical compound capsaicin found in chilies. The habanero can have between 100,000 and 500,000 units. As a comparison, a jalapeño chili has between 5000 and 15,000 units and Hungarian hot paprika between 100 and 500 units.

Now, if a little more of what you can tolerate finds its way into your mouth, this is what you need to know: the heat of the habanero is relentless and will spread quickly throughout your mouth. No matter what your instincts tell you, don't drink water, and don't even think about reaching for that beer. Any liquid will spread the flames deeper into your mouth. Instead, eat something that will neutralize the capsaicin: bread, beans or rice are good options, but if you happen to have a chocolate bar with you, eat it. Chocolate is by far the best antidote to cut the burning sensation caused by a hot pepper.

LOVE STORY

According to legend, *balché* was created as an act of love between a beautiful Mayan girl Sak-Nicté (White Flower) and a brave young warrior. As the story goes, the young couple fled their tribe when a powerful cacique (indigenous chief) also declared his love to Sak-Nicté. After days of wandering in the Mayan forest, the lovebirds found a honeycomb. Sak-Nicté and the warrior had a feast with the sweet honey, and decided to save some inside the trunk of a *balché* tree. That night brought rain and thunder, and the water blended with the honey inside the tree creating a luscious beverage.

When the cacique found them, he ordered Sak-Nicté to return to her tribe. The young warrior was devastated and in a desperate attempt to keep her lover at his side, he offered to cook for the cacique a fantastic meal. He accepted and the couple served him a banquet, crowned with the sweet drink they had discovered. The cacique was so impressed with the *balché* that he let the two lovers go, under the condition that they share with him how to prepare it.

(street stalls or small establishments selling all kinds of fresh-squeezed orange, tangerine, strawberry, papaya, beet or carrot juices) are widely available. In some cases they will serve local fruits, like mangoes, *cayumito* (a purple plum-like fruit), *zapote negro* (black fruit with a pear-like consistency) and *marañón* (cashew fruit). *Juguerías* also sell *licuados*, a Mexican version of a milkshake that normally includes banana, milk, honey and fruit. And many serve incredibly creative combinations, such as vanilla, banana and avocado.

Aguas frescas (fresh drinks made with fruit, herbs or flowers) are standard Mexican refreshments. Some of them resemble iced teas. In *agua de tamarindo* the tamarind pods are boiled and then mixed with sugar before chilled, and the *agua de jamaica* is made with dried hibiscus leaves. Others like *horchata* are made with melon seeds and/or rice. Two local favorites are *agua de chia* (a plant from the *salvia* family) that is typical during Holy Week celebrations in Chiapas, and the leaves from the native shrub *chaya* are mixed with lime, honey and pineapple to create *agua de chaya* on the rest of the peninsula.

In *juguerías* you can expect the water to be purified.

CELEBRATIONS

Food and fiestas go hand-in-hand in Mexico. During the spring *ch'a chaak* ceremony, which takes place in agricultural villages around the peninsula, tortillas and turkey are traditionally offered up to the rain gods and then eaten. The tortillas are made into 'layered cakes,' with ground squash seeds, beans and other vegetables, wrapped in banana leaves and buried to be cooked over charcoals. Turkey and other wild game is cooked in *kol*, a broth thickened with masa. The men drink *balché*.

During Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) on 2 November it is traditional in many areas of the peninsula to eat a special tamale called *muc bil pollo*. In Mayan *mukbil* means buried and this is how this tamale is made. Corn masa is mixed with beef broth and placed inside a container covered with banana leaves. The masa is stuffed with chicken and pork meat that has been cooked with achiote, *chile dulce*, epazote, onion and habanero chili, and it is topped with more banana leaves and tied. The tamale is buried and covered with charcoal and sand.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Food on the peninsula is available in many places, whether it be a small *puesto* (street or market stall), a simple cafeteria or a fine restaurant. One thing you should know, though, is that mealtimes in Mexico are different

from other countries, and if you're outside one of the major tourist destinations, like Cancún, restaurants close early. *Desayuno* (breakfast) is usually served in restaurants and cafeterias from 8:30am to 11am, and it tends to be on the heavy side. Those who have a light breakfast or skipped it altogether can have an *almuerzo* (a type of brunch) for an *antojito* or another type of quick bite. *Loncherías* (places that serve light meals) are good options for an *almuerzo*. In Mexico the main meal is the *comida*. It's usually served from 2pm to 4:30pm in homes, restaurants and cafés. Places called *fondas* are small, family-run eateries that serve *comida corrida*, an inexpensive *prix fixe* menu that includes a soup, rice, main dish, beverage and dessert. In some small towns people will have a *merienda*, a light snack between the *comida* and *la cena* (supper). Dinner is served anytime after 7pm and restaurants in small towns won't remain open beyond 8:30pm or 9pm.

Cantinas are the traditional Mexican watering holes. Until recently, women, military personnel and children were not allowed in cantinas, and some cantinas still have a rusted sign stating this rule. Today everybody is allowed, although the more traditional establishments retain a macho edge. Beer, tequila and *cubas* (rum and coke) are served at square tables where patrons play dominoes and watch *fútbol* (soccer) games on large TV screens. Cantinas are famous for serving *botanas* (appetizers).

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Mexicans think of a vegetarian as a person that doesn't eat meat, and by 'meat' they mean red meat. Many more have never heard the word *veganista*, the Spanish term for vegan. The good news is that almost every city, large or small, has real vegetarian restaurants, and their popularity is increasing. Also, many traditional Mexican and Yucatecan dishes are vegetarian. Be warned, however, that many dishes are prepared using chicken or beef broth, or some kind of animal fat, such as *manteca* (lard). Most waiters would be happy to help you in choosing vegetarian or vegan dishes, but you have to make your requirements clear.

EATING WITH KIDS

In most restaurants in Mexico you will see entire families and their kids eating together, especially on weekends. Waiters are used to accommodating children and will promptly help you with high chairs (*silla para niños* or *silla periquera*), and in some places they will bring crayons or some other toys to keep kids entertained. Across Mexico it's common to see children having dinner in restaurants after 8pm or 9pm.

EAT YOUR WORDS

For non-Spanish speakers, travel and dining on the Caribbean coast usually pose no problem; English is understood almost everywhere. However, once you leave the tourist bubble, a few words in Spanish will go a long way, and at the same time indicate a respect for the Yucatecans and their culture.

TIPPING & TAXES

A mandatory *impuesto de valor agregado* (IVA, or value-added tax; 15%) is added to restaurant checks in Mexico, but the *propina* (gratuity) is not. The average tip is 15% to 20%, and although some people argue that the tip should be calculated before IVA, it's just easier to tip the same amount, or a bit more, than the amount marked for the IVA. For instance, in a check that marks IVA \$82 pesos, a tip between 80 and 100 pesos would be appropriate.

Useful Phrases

Are you open?

¿Está abierto?

e-sta a-byer-to

Are you serving breakfast/lunch/dinner now?

¿Ahora, está sirviendo desayuno/la comida/la cena?

a-o-ra e-sta ser-vyen-do de-sa-yoo-no/la ko-mee-da/la se-na

I'd like to see a menu.

Quisiera ver la carta/el menú.

kee-sye-ra ver la kar-ta/el me-noo

Do you have a menu in English?

¿Tienen un menú en inglés?

te-en-nen oon me-noo en een-gles

I'm a vegetarian.

Soy vegetariano/a. (m/f)

soy ve-khe-te-rya-no/a

I can't eat anything with meat or poultry products, including broth.

No puedo comer algo de carne o aves, incluyendo caldo.

no pwe-do ko-mer al-go de kar-ne o a-ves een-kloo-yen-do kal-do

Is it (spicy) hot?

¿Es picoso?

es pee-ko-so

The check, please.

La cuenta, por favor.

la kwen-ta por fa-vor

Food Glossary

MEAT & POULTRY

<i>a la parrilla</i>	a la pa-ree-ya	grilled
<i>a la plancha</i>	a la plan-cha	pan-broiled
<i>albóndigas</i>	al-bon-dee-gas	meatballs
<i>aves</i>	a-ves	poultry
<i>bistec</i>	bis-tek	steak
<i>borrego</i>	bo-re-ga	sheep
<i>carne (asada)</i>	kar-ne (a-sa-da)	meat (grilled beef)
<i>carne de puerco</i>	kar-ne de pwer-ko	pork
<i>carne de res</i>	kar-ne de res	beef
<i>chicharrones</i>	chee-cha-ro-nes	deep-fried pork skin
<i>chorizo</i>	cho-ree-so	Mexican-style sausage made with chili and vinegar
<i>frijol con puerco</i>	fri-khol kon pwer-ko	Yucatecan-style pork and beans, topped with a sauce made with grilled tomatoes, and decorated with garnishes; served with rice
<i>jamón</i>	kha-mon	ham
<i>lechón</i>	le-chon	suckling pig
<i>milanesa</i>	mee-la-ne-sa	breaded beef cutlet
<i>pavo</i>	pa-vo	turkey
<i>pibil</i>	pee-beel	meat wrapped in banana leaves, flavored with achiote, garlic, sour orange, salt and pepper, and baked in a pit oven; the two main varieties are <i>cochinita pibil</i> (suckling pig) and <i>pollo pibil</i> (chicken)
<i>picadillo</i>	pee-ka-dee-yo	a ground beef filling that often includes fruit and nuts
<i>poc-chuc</i>	pok-chook	tender pork strips marinated in sour orange juice, grilled and served topped with a spicy onion relish
<i>pollo</i>	po-yo	chicken
<i>puchero</i>	pu-che-ro	a stew of pork, chicken, carrots, squash, potatoes, plantains and chayote (vegetable pear), spiced with radish, fresh cilantro and sour orange
<i>tocino</i>	to-see-no	bacon
<i>venado</i>	ve-na-do	venison, a popular traditional dish

SEAFOOD

<i>calamar</i>	ka-la-mar	squid
<i>camarones</i>	ka-ma-ro-nes	shrimp
<i>cangrejo</i>	kan-gre-kho	large crab
<i>ceviche</i>	se-vee-che	raw fish, marinated in lime juice
<i>filete</i>	fee-le-te	fillet
<i>langosta</i>	lan-gos-ta	lobster
<i>mariscos</i>	ma-rees-kos	shellfish
<i>ostiones</i>	os-tyo-nes	oysters
<i>pescado</i>	pes-ka-do	fish as food
<i>pulpo</i>	pool-po	octopus

EGGS

<i>(huevos) estrellados</i>	(hwe-vos) es-tre-ya-dos	fried (eggs)
<i>huevos motuleños</i>	hwe-vos mo-too-le-nyos	'Eggs in the style of Motul'; fried eggs atop a tortilla, garnished with beans, peas, chopped ham, sausage, grated cheese and a certain amount of spicy chili
<i>huevos rancheros</i>	hwe-vos ran-che-ros	fried eggs served on a corn tortilla, topped with a sauce of tomato, chilies and onions
<i>huevos revueltos</i>	hwe-vos re-vwel-tos	scrambled eggs

SOUP

<i>caldo</i>	kal-do	broth or soup
<i>consomé</i>	con-so-may	broth made from chicken or mutton base
<i>sopa</i>	so-pa	soup, either 'wet' or 'dry' as in rice and pasta
<i>sopa de lima</i>	so-pa de lee-ma	'lime soup'; chicken broth with bits of shredded chicken, tortilla strips, lime juice and chopped lime

SNACKS

<i>antojitos</i>	an-to-khee-tos	'little whims,' corn- and tortilla-based snacks, such as tacos and <i>gorditas</i>
<i>empanada</i>	em-pa-na-da	pastry turnover filled with meat, cheese or fruits
<i>enchiladas</i>	en-chee-la-das	corn tortillas dipped in chili sauce, wrapped around meat or poultry and garnished with cheese
<i>gordita</i>	gor-dee-ta	thick, fried tortilla, sliced open and stuffed with eggs, sausage etc, and topped with lettuce and cheese
<i>panuchos</i>	pa-noo-chos	Yucatán's favorite snack: a handmade tortilla stuffed with mashed black beans, fried till it puffs up, then topped with shredded turkey or chicken, onion and slices of avocado
<i>papadzules</i>	pa-pad-zoo-les	tortillas stuffed with chopped hard-boiled eggs and topped with a sauce of marrow squash (zucchini) or cucumber seeds
<i>papas fritas</i>	pa-pas free-tas	french fries
<i>quesadilla</i>	ke-sa-dee-ya	cheese and other items folded inside a tortilla and fried or grilled
<i>relleno negro</i>	re-ye-no ne-gro	turkey stuffed with chopped, spiced pork and served in a rich, dark sauce
<i>(queso) relleno</i>	(ke-so) re-le-no	stuffed (cheese), Dutch edam filled with minced meat and spices
<i>salbutes</i>	sal-boo-tes	same as <i>panuchos</i> but without the bean stuffing
<i>sope</i>	so-pe	thick corn-dough patty lightly grilled, served with salsa, beans, onions and cheese
<i>torta</i>	tor-ta	sandwich in a roll, often spread with beans and garnished with avocado slices

DESSERTS

<i>helado</i>	e-la-do	ice cream
<i>nieve</i>	nye-ve	sorbet
<i>paleta</i>	pa-le-ta	popsize
<i>pastel</i>	pas-tel	cake
<i>postr</i>	pos-tre	dessert

FRUIT & VEGETABLES

<i>aceituna</i>	a-say-too-na	olive
<i>calabacita</i>	ka-la-ba-see-ta	squash
<i>cebolla</i>	se-bo-lya	onion
<i>champiñones</i>	sham-pee-nyo-nes	mushrooms
<i>coco</i>	ko-ko	coconut
<i>elote</i>	e-lo-te	corn on the cob
<i>ensalada</i>	en-sa-la-da	salad
<i>fresa</i>	fre-sa	strawberry
<i>frijoles</i>	fri-kho-les	beans
<i>guayaba</i>	gwa-ya-ba	guava
<i>jicama</i>	khee-ka-ma	turnip-like tuber, often sliced and garnished with chili and lime; sweet, crunchy and refreshing
<i>jitomate</i>	khee-to-ma-te	tomato
<i>lechuga</i>	le-choo-ga	lettuce
<i>limón</i>	lee-mon	lemon
<i>maíz</i>	mai-ees	corn
<i>papas</i>	pa-pas	potatoes
<i>piña</i>	pee-nya	pineapple
<i>plátano macho</i>	pla-ta-no ma-cho	plantain
<i>plátano</i>	pla-ta-no	banana
<i>toronja</i>	to-ran-kha	grapefruit
<i>verduras</i>	ver-doo-ras	vegetables

CONDIMENTS & OTHER FOODS

<i>achiote</i>	a-cho-te	reddish paste obtained from annatto seeds
<i>arroz</i>	a-roz	rice
<i>azúcar</i>	a-soo-kar	sugar
<i>mantequilla</i>	man-te-kee-ya	butter
<i>mole</i>	mo-le	a handmade chocolate and chili sauce
<i>pan</i>	pan	bread
<i>sal</i>	sal	salt

DRINKS

<i>agua mineral</i>	a-gwa mee-ne-ral	mineral water or club soda
<i>agua purificada</i>	a-gwa poo-ree-fee-ka-da	bottled uncarbonated water
<i>atole</i>	a-to-le	corn-based hot drink flavored with cinnamon or fruit
<i>café (con leche/lechero)</i>	ka-fe (kon le-che/le-che-ro)	coffee (with hot milk)
<i>café americano</i>	ka-fe a-me-ree-ka-no	black coffee
<i>caguama</i>	ka-gwa-ma	liter bottle of beer
<i>horchata</i>	hor-cha-ta	rice drink
<i>jamaica</i>	kha-may-ka	hibiscus flower, chief ingredient of <i>agua de jamaica</i> , a cold tangy tea
<i>jugo de naranja</i>	khoo-go de na-ran-kha	orange juice
<i>leche</i>	le-che	milk
<i>té de manzanilla</i>	te de man-sa-nee-ya	chamomile tea
<i>té negro</i>	te ne-gro	black tea

Environment

Arching northward between two seas like the head and shoulders of a *chac-mool* sculpture (as one Yucatecan poet put it), the Yucatán Peninsula has an insular character, in both its physical isolation from the Mexican interior and its distinct topography and wildlife.

THE LAND

Separated from the bulk of Mexico by the Gulf of Mexico, and from the Greater Antilles by the Caribbean Sea, the Yucatán Peninsula is a vast, low limestone shelf extending under the sea for more than 100km to the north and west. The eastern (Caribbean) side drops off much more precipitously. This underwater shelf makes Yucatán's coastline wonderful for aquatic sports, keeping the waters warm and the marine life abundant.

Approaching by air, you can easily make out the barrier reef that runs parallel to the Caribbean coastline at a distance of a few hundred meters to about 1.5km. Known variously as the Great Maya, Mesoamerican or Belize Barrier Reef, it's the longest of its kind in the northern hemisphere – and the second largest in the world – extending from southern Belize to Isla Mujeres off the northern coast of Quintana Roo. On the landward side of the reef, the water is usually no more than 5m to 10m deep; on the seaward side it plunges to depths of more than 2000m in the Yucatán Channel running between the peninsula and Cuba.

The peninsula is divided into three states in a 'Y' shape, with the state of Yucatán occupying the upper portion, flanked to the west and east by the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo respectively. Note that while Tabasco and Chiapas are included in this book, they are not part of the Yucatán Peninsula.

Unlike much of Mexico, the Yucatán remains unobstructed by mountains. It rises to no more than a dozen meters above sea level in its northern section, and at its steepest, in the southern interior of Campeche state, only reaches about 300m. About 60km south of Mérida, near Ticul, the flat Yucatán plain gives way to the rolling hills of the Puuc ('hill' in Maya) region.

Capped by a razor-thin crust of soil, the peninsula is less productive agriculturally than elsewhere in Mexico. Formed by cretaceous-era sediments, its porous limestone bedrock does not allow rivers to flow on its surface, except in short stretches near the sea where their roofs have collapsed and in the southernmost reaches of the region where the peninsula joins the rest of Mexico (and Guatemala). Some underground streams don't release their water until well offshore; others empty into lagoons near the sea, such as the lovely Laguna Bacalar in southern Quintana Roo.

A uniquely Yucatecan geological feature, cenotes (pronounced *seh-noh-tays*) – from the Maya word *d'zonot*, meaning 'water-filled cavern' – are formed by the erosive effects of rainwater drilling down through the porous limestone.

An estimated 3000 of these limestone sinkholes dot the peninsula landscape. Yucatecans have traditionally gotten their fresh water from these natural cisterns, while modern visitors favor their crystalline waters for swimming and snorkeling (see boxed text, p64). South of the Puuc region, the inhabitants draw water from the *chenes* (limestone pools), more than 100m below ground.

Planeta.com (www.planeta.com) brims with information and links for those wanting to delve deeper into Mexico and the Yucatán's flora, fauna and environment.

Around 3000 cenotes (natural underground pools) dot the Yucatán Peninsula.

HURRICANE ALLEY: THE PATH OF WILMA AND DEAN

Hurricanes have always walloped the Yucatán, but in recent years it feels like they are just getting bigger and badder. Blame global warming, blame Al Gore, blame regularly shifting climate patterns; whatever you decide to blame, the real loser has been the people, plants and animals of the Yucatán.

It started on October 22, 2005, when Hurricane Wilma hit the Yucatán's northeast coast – and stayed there for more than 30 hours. The 13th hurricane of the turbulent 2005 season – and fourth to reach Category 5 status – Wilma vented her worst forces on Isla Holbox, Isla Cozumel, Puerto Morelos and Cancún, causing M\$20 billion in damages. Playa del Carmen and the Riviera Maya to the south were left largely unscathed.

Two years later Dean came to town, leveling the town of Mahahual and felling thousands of trees in southern Quintana Roo. For more on the path of Dean, see boxed text, p133.

While residents are slowly recovering from these hurricanes, the environmental wounds inflicted by Wilma and Dean could take much longer to heal. Many trees were uprooted by the storms, leaving dead branches that will serve as fuel for fires, adding to those already left behind in the wake of Hurricane Isidore, which ravaged the state of Yucatán in 2002.

WILDLIFE

The isolation of the Yucatán Peninsula and its range of ecosystems results in an extraordinary variety of plant and animal life, including a number of species that are unique to the region. Whether you like watching exotic birds, following the progress of sea turtles as they nest on the beach, swimming next to manta rays and schools of iridescent fish, or spying wildcats through your binoculars, you'll have plenty to do here.

Animals BIRDS

For bird-watchers, the Yucatán is indeed a banquet. Over 500 bird species – about half of those found in the whole country – inhabit or regularly visit the peninsula. These include dozens of regional endemics; the island of Cozumel alone boasts three unique species.

Most of the peninsula's birds are represented in the various parks and biosphere reserves, and serious birders should make for at least a few of these. Numerous coastal species can be spotted at the Reserva de la Biósfera Ría Celestún (p180) and Reserva de la Biósfera Ría Lagartos (p198), on the western and eastern ends, respectively, of Yucatán state's coast. The varied panorama is due to a highly productive ecosystem where substantial freshwater sources empty into the Gulf of Mexico. A similarly diverse coastal habitat can be found at the Laguna de Términos (p219) in western Campeche. Parque Nacional Isla Contoy (p96), off the northern coast of Quintana Roo, is a haven for olive cormorants, brown boobies and many other seabirds.

Moving inland, the panorama shifts. The low, dry forests of the Puuc region contain two species of mot-mot, which nest in ruined temples. In the denser forests of the Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul, train your binoculars on harpy eagles, ocellated turkeys and king vultures.

The Yucatán Peninsula is along the central migratory flyway, and between November and February hundreds of thousands of birds migrate here from harsher northern climes. The region's proximity to the Caribbean Sea also means you'll find island species not seen elsewhere in Mexico.

In late November or early December the environmental group **Ecoturismo Yucatán** (☎ 999-920-2772; www.ecoyuc.com) holds the Toh Festival, an annual birding festival that attracts enthusiasts from far and wide. This bird-a-thon,

The Spanish-language monthly magazine *México Desconocido* points out off-the-beaten track destinations and wildlife-watching spots with copious color photos and maps. Its website (www.mexicodesconocido.com.mx) includes an English-language section.

Birders should carry *Mexican Birds* by Roger Tory Peterson and Edward L. Chalif, or *Birds of Mexico & Adjacent Areas* by Ernest Preston Edwards.

whose name is Maya for the locally seen turquoise-browed mot-mot, is based in Mérida but stages events in various parts of the peninsula.

LAND ANIMALS

Around a quarter of the mammal species that exist in Mexico roam the Yucatán Peninsula. Some are the last of their breed.

There are jaguars in the forests, although, despite the Maya's traditional fascination with the New World's largest cat, poaching has all but wiped them out in southeastern Mexico. Your best chances of spotting one in the wild are probably in the Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul (p222) in Campeche state. The peninsula's other native wildcat, the jaguarundi, is also at risk, as are the margay, ocelot and puma, though sightings of the latter aren't all that unusual in southern Yucatán.

The agile spider monkey inhabits some forested areas of the region. It looks something like a smaller, long-tailed version of the gibbon (an ape native to southwest Asia). Another elusive primate, the howler monkey, frequents forest around the ruins of Calakmul and isolated pockets elsewhere. Howlers are more often heard than seen, but you have a fair chance of seeing both them and spider monkeys at Punta Laguna (p132).

Hiking around the forest, you may run into tapirs and piglike peccaries (javelinas), as well as armor-plated armadillos. There are several species of anteater, all with very long, flexible snouts and sharp-clawed, shovel-like front paws – the two tools needed to seek out and enjoy feeding on ants and other insects. The animal's slow gait and poor eyesight make it a common roadkill victim. Besides the *tepezcuintle* (paca) and *sereque* (agouti) – large, tailless rodents – a few species of deer can be found as well, including the smallest variety in North America.

Crocodiles still ply the mangroves near the towns of Río Lagartos and Celestún in Yucatán state. Although their numbers are fast diminishing, plenty of the beady-eyed amphibious reptiles inhabit the Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an (p133), while smaller numbers lurk up and down the Caribbean coast, including at Laguna Nichupté, which backs onto Cancún's Zona Hotelera.

SEA CREATURES

The Great Maya Barrier Reef, paralleling the length of Quintana Roo's coast, is home to some of the finest snorkeling and diving in the world, a technicolor display of tremendous variety. The coney grouper, for example, is impossible to miss in its bright-yellow suit (it varies in color from reddish brown to sun yellow). The redband parrot fish is easy to recognize by the striking red circle around its eyes and the red band that runs from the eyes to the gills. Butterfly fish are as flamboyant as their name suggests (there are six species in the area), and the yellow stingray has spots that closely resemble the rosettes of a golden jaguar.

Providing an extraordinary backdrop to these brilliant stars of the sea is a vast array of corals. These come in two varieties: hard corals, such as the great star coral, the boulder coral and numerous brain corals; and soft corals, such as sea fans and sea plumes, which are particularly delicate and sway with the current. Successive generations of coral form a skin of living organisms over the limestone reef.

Complementing the experience is a water temperature that seldom dips below 77°F (27°C) and an amazing level of visibility. Because this coast contains not a single exposed river (many underground rivers do present themselves as they near the sea, but they carry very little soil), there's practically no sediment to cloud the water. The crystalline condition is only

To see recently snapped photos of jaguars, pumas and other Yucatán fauna in their habitat, go to the website of the environmental group Pronatura (www.pronatura-ppy.org.mx).

compromised during or after a storm, and for several weeks around April-May and September-October when reef animals and plants release zillions of eggs and droplets of sperm.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Pollution, poaching, illegal traffic of rare species and the filling in of coastal areas for yet another resort are taking an enormous toll on the Yucatán's wildlife. Deforestation is also a major threat. While the Maya have practiced slash-and-burn agriculture for more than 2000 years, massive cutting really began to pick up in the 1960s. Since then more than five million hectares of forest have been felled in the Yucatán. Species on the peninsula that are threatened with extinction include five species of cat (the jaguar, puma, ocelot, margay and jaguarundi), four species of sea turtle, the manatee, the tapir and hundreds of bird species, including the harpy eagle, the red flamingo and the jabiru stork.

Various efforts are being made to save these and other endangered creatures from extinction, chiefly by environmental NGOs, such as **The Nature Conservancy** (www.nature.org) and its local partner **Pronatura** (☎ 999-988-4436; www.pronatura-ppy.org.mx; Calle 32 No 269, Col Pinzón, Mérida) This group focuses on preservation of wildlife habitats, particularly in the Ría Celestún, Ría Lagartos and Calakmul biosphere reserves, as well as the promotion of ecotourism. In particular, Pronatura is working to recover jaguar habitat in the area between the Reserva de la Biósfera Ría Lagartos and Isla Holbox, where 120 to 200 of these cats roam.

Camps at Ría Lagartos, Laguna de Términos and Isla Holbox have been established to promote the survival of the six species of marine turtle that nest on the Yucatán's beaches. Volunteers collect turtle eggs and release hatchlings into the sea, and patrols prevent poachers from snatching eggs that are laid on the beaches. In Punta Laguna (p132) environmental groups are working with local *campesinos* (agricultural workers) to establish protection zones for endangered spider monkeys, which are closely monitored by researchers. The nutrient-rich waters around Isla Holbox attract whale sharks (see boxed text, p97), which are threatened by commercial fishing, and environmentalists have succeeded in getting this area categorized as a protected zone.

Plants

Vegetation varies greatly on the peninsula, with plants falling into four main categories: aquatic and subaquatic vegetation, and humid and subhumid forests. As you move inland from the coast, mangrove swamps are replaced

Tropical Mexico – The Ecotravellers' Wildlife Guide by Les Beletsky is a well-illustrated, informative guide to the land, air and sea life of southeastern Mexico.

IN FOCUS: THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF MASS TOURISM *Lucy Gallagher*

Pinpointing the main environmental problems in the region is an extremely difficult task as there are so many! In order to accommodate all these workers, towns have mushroomed and, unfortunately, proper infrastructure has not been put in place. As a consequence, some of the main issues are solid-waste management and waste-water management. There is no adequate garbage removal system in most Riviera Maya towns, and the water treatment plants for the 'pueblos' in the region are either nonexistent or redundant. As a result, sewage generally ends up in the underground water systems and cenotes (limestone sinkholes) and then taken out to sea. This black or gray water, rich in nutrients, acts like a fertilizer and increases algal growth in the ocean. The algae, in turn, smothers coral, which has an impact on the entire marine environment.

You can learn more about Mexconservación at www.mexconservacion.org.

Lucy Gallagher, Marine Projects Director, Mexconservación

first by a fairly dense forest of low deciduous trees, then by a more jungle zone with tall trees and climbing vegetation and more than a few air plants (but without the soggy underbrush and multiple canopies you'd find further south). The taller trees of the peninsula's southern half harbor more than 100 species of orchid; for the really spectacular blooms, the avid orchid hunter will need to head into the highlands of Chiapas, where the exotic plants thrive at an elevation of about 1000m.

Dispersed among the mango and avocado trees are many annuals and perennials, such as the aptly named *flamboyan* (royal poinciana), bursting into bloom like a red-orange umbrella, and lavender-tinged jacaranda.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

There are several national parks on the peninsula, some scarcely larger than the ancient Maya cities they contain – Parque Nacional Tulum is a good example of this. Others, such as Parque Nacional Isla Contoy (p96), a bird sanctuary in northeastern Quintana Roo, are larger and have been designated to protect wildlife.

The fact that former president Ernesto Zedillo was an avid scuba diver was likely a factor in the creation of several *parques marinos nacionales* (national marine parks) off the coast of Quintana Roo: Arrecifes de Cozumel; Costa Occidental de Isla Mujeres, Punta Cancún y Nizuc; and Arrecifes de Puerto Morelos.

Very large national biosphere reserves surround Río Lagartos, Celestún (both in Yucatán state) and Banco Chinchorro (Quintana Roo), spreading across thousands of hectares. The Reservas de la Biósfera Ría Lagartos (p198) and Ría Celestún (p180) are well known for their diversity of bird and animal species, including large colonies of flamingos, while Banco Chinchorro (p137) contains a massive coral atoll, many shipwrecks and a host of marine species.

Even more impressive are the two colossal Unesco-designated biosphere reserves found in the Yucatán: the Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul (p222), covering more than 7230 sq km in Campeche, Quintana Roo and Chiapas, as well as parts of Belize and Guatemala, is home to more than 300 species of birds. Jaguars, pumas, tapirs, coatis, peccaries and many other animals also call the preserve home. The Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an (p133), beginning 150km south of Cancún, covers 6000 sq km, including 100 sq km of the Great Maya Barrier Reef. Its life-forms range from more than 70 species of coral to 350 species of bird (by comparison, there are only 400 species of bird in all of Europe). Crocodiles, pumas, jaguars and jabirus are among the animals calling Sian Ka'an home.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Large-scale tourism developments are affecting and sometimes erasing fragile ecosystems, especially along the 'Riviera Maya' south of Cancún. Many hectares of vital mangrove swamp have been bulldozed, and beaches where turtles once laid eggs are now occupied by resorts and condo-mundos. Ironically, tourism development is a major contributor to coastal erosion, as was made evident when 2005's Hurricane Wilma swept away the very beaches (many man-made) that attract hordes of tourists annually. And with the proliferation of new hotels comes the need for freshwater sources, increasing the danger of salinization of the water table. As employment-seekers converge on Quintana Roo's tourist zones, demand for building materials to construct makeshift housing for the burgeoning population is a persistent issue.

Another key issue is the fragmentation of habitat. As patches of jungle shrink with new settlement and construction of new highways, they

The Selva de Norte, which spans the southern part of the Yucatán Peninsula and northern Guatemala and Belize, is the world's second-largest tropical forest after the Amazon.

SMALL FOOTPRINTS, LARGE IMPACT: MORE TIPS TO STAYING GREEN

Travelers can help protect the Yucatán's environment by taking the following steps.

- Hire local guides. Not only does this provide local communities a more ecologically sound way of supporting themselves, it also attaches value to nature and wildlife.
- Avoid places that exploit wildlife for cheap thrills: taking pictures of the kids with a monkey, swimming with dolphins, turtle riding.
- Try to observe wildlife in its natural environment.
- Don't buy souvenirs made from endangered plants and animals that have been acquired illegally. By purchasing these items you aid in their extinction.
- Don't carry off anything that you pick up at the site of an ancient city or out on a coral reef. Don't buy these products if offered by locals.
- When snorkeling or scuba diving, be careful what you touch and where you place your feet; not only can coral cut you, but it's extremely fragile and takes years to grow even a finger's length.
- Keep water use down, especially in areas that have signs requesting you to do so. Most of the Yucatán Peninsula has limited water reserves, and in times of drought the situation can become grave.

become isolated and species become trapped in smaller habitats. Animals' movements are restricted and the gene pool cannot flow beyond the borders of their fragmented habitat.

Mexico's largest oil field, the Cantarell complex, is in the Bay of Campeche 85km off the shore of Ciudad del Carmen. In 2007 there was an 11,700-barrel oil spill in the bay. The oil will affect the marine life and birdlife of the region, but at the time of publication there were no reliable reports as to the extent of the damage. The Cantarell field is also yielding less oil than it did in the past, leading the company to seek new sources in the Alacranes reef off the coast of Progreso, and at Laguna de Términos, where further habitat destruction is feared.

And, of course, you can't underplay the effects global warming may be having on the peninsula. Over the past few years hurricanes seem to have grown in strength in the region, with both Dean and Wilma creating massive damage (see boxed text, p59).

Through the efforts of nongovernmental environmental groups, such as Pronatura, the level of protection on reserves has increased in recent years, and new reserves have been established and corridors extended. In 2004, for example, 370,000 acres of threatened forest in the Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul was permanently protected. However, Yucatán's protected zones and reserves actually encompass private *ejido* (communally owned land) occupied by *campesinos*, whose activities, particularly cattle raising and logging, may infringe upon the environment. Seeking a solution, some environmental organizations have begun training *ejido* inhabitants as guides for ecotourism activities, thus providing alternative livelihoods. Such programs are under way in the Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul and on Isla Holbox.

Think before you drink!
Around 2.7 million tons of plastic are used to bottle water each year. Stay green by asking your hotelier to provide water coolers or by carrying your own water filter.

Yucatán Outdoors

Yucatán is home to the second-largest barrier reef in the world, making this a world-class diving and snorkeling destination.

Most visitors come to the Yucatán for the beaches, leaving the rest of the peninsula wide open for exploration and adventure. Come here to rip across warm surf beneath the wind-filled parabola of a kiteboard; dive into the aquatic wonderworlds inhabited by resplendent corals and technicolor schools of fish; leap from limestone ridges into the crystalline waters of Yucatán's mysterious, otherworldly cenotes (limestone sinkholes containing fresh water); or get sweaty (we mean really sweaty) as you cut your way through jungle trails to lost pyramids.

The Yucatán's amazing biological preserves offer hikers, kayakers and other outdoor wanderers the chance to spot birds and animals few people still see in the wild. Even the quickest of detours brings you face to face with everything you thought you'd only see on television, or invest yourself a bit more for a once-in-a-lifetime multiday trek or kayak.

Whatever your pleasure, be it the heart-stopping rush hanging on to a jungle-canopy zipline or a quiet stroll along a romantic, secluded beach at sunset, the Yucatán has what you're looking for. Don't hesitate to step outside the lines or do something on the spur of the moment. Those moments are likely to be the best ones of your whole trip.

DIVING & SNORKELING

The cenotes of Cuzamá are the most frequently photographed sinkholes of the peninsula.

Without a doubt, diving and snorkeling are the area's top activity draw. The Caribbean is world famous for its wonderful coral reefs and translucent waters full of tropical fish. The Yucatán's reefs stretch from the northeastern tip near Isla Contoy and as far south as Belize. Isla Cozumel (p108), once a pilgrimage site of the Maya and all but abandoned except by a small fishing community, was brought to the world's attention by Jacques Cousteau in 1961, shortly after the perfection of the Aqua-Lung. Guided by local fishermen, Cousteau was able to show – for the first time – the astounding richness of Cozumel's reefs, sparking in many who see it a lifelong passion for diving.

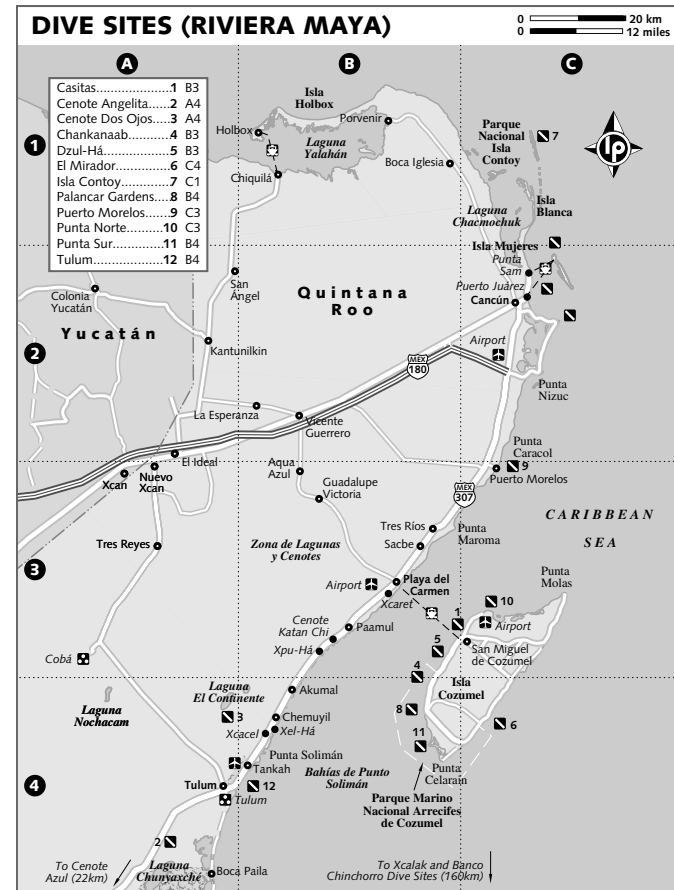
Although Cozumel was hammered by two hurricanes (Emily and Wilma) in 2005, most of the island's diveable reefs, and all of the deeper ones, remained unharmed. Unsurprisingly, it was the snorkeling sites that were hardest hit; yet, thanks to the tireless efforts of the local diving community (whose livelihood depends on the health of the reefs) and to the resilience

DIVING CENOTES

When you find yourself yawning at the green morays, eagle rays, dolphins, sea turtles, nurse sharks and multitudinous tropical fish, you're ready to dive a cenote (a deep limestone sinkhole containing water). Hook up with a reputable dive shop and prepare for (in the immortal words of Monty Python) 'something completely different.'

You'll be lucky if you see four fish on a typical cenote dive. Trade brilliance for darkness, blue for black, check that your regulator is working flawlessly and enter a world unlike anything you've ever dived before. Soar around stalactites and stalagmites, hover above cake-frosting formations and glide around in tunnels that will make you think you're in outer space.

Keep in mind these are fragile environments. Avoid applying sunscreen or insect repellent right before entering. Use care when approaching, entering or exiting, as the rocks are often slippery. Loud noises such as yelling disturb bats and other creatures – though most people find themselves subdued by the presence in these caverns. In rare cases, tourists have been seriously injured or killed by climbing on the roots or stalactites.



of this amazing ecosystem, things are returning to normal. If you're a diver heading to this area, Cozumel's Punta Sur and Palancar Gardens (see boxed text, p113) are must-sees. Snorkelers will want to check out Dzul-Há and Casitas, both of which are near the town of San Miguel de Cozumel. Hurricanes are not the only weather-related issue for divers, though. In Cozumel, *nortes* (storms bringing wind and rain from the north) can blow so strongly that the harbormaster closes ports – sometimes for days. While this won't affect the ferry between Cozumel and Playa del Carmen, it can wreck diving plans.

Though Cozumel is a must-see, serious divers will be happy to know that there are great dives to be enjoyed all along the eastern coast of the Yucatán Peninsula. Cancun, Isla Mujeres, Puerto Morelos, Playa del Carmen and Xcalak are all prime places to plan a diving vacation. The Banco Chinchorro (see 'Digging Out After Dean, the Big Picture', p133), the largest coral atoll in the northern hemisphere, was hard-hit by Hurricane Dean in 2007. At the time of publication, there was no news regarding the damage to the reef, so call a local operator (p137) before visiting.

Cenotes and lagoons are fragile ecosystems. Most environmentalists urge visitors to not wear sunscreen when entering these miraculous bodies.

RESPONSIBLE DIVING & SNORKELING

Please consider the following tips when diving and help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs:

- Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother them.
- Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time in them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed the fish.
- Minimize your disturbance of marine animals. Never ride on the backs of turtles.

Most of the places listed earlier are also great snorkeling spots. The best snorkeling is generally reached by boats, but the areas near Akumal, Isla Mujeres and Cozumel all offer pretty decent beach-accessed spots. Inland you can dive or swim in some of the Yucatán's famed cenotes (see boxed text, p124).

Most dive shops expect that you have your own equipment. If you do rent diving equipment, try to make sure that it's up to standard. And remember that coral reefs and other marine ecosystems are particularly fragile environments. For tips on caring for them and other tips for responsible diving, see boxed text, above.

KAYAKING

For those who like to keep their head above water, consider renting a kayak and exploring the shoreline or a mangrove swamp. Yucatán's coastal lagoons and sheltered bays make for magnificent kayaking, and there's often interesting wildlife to be seen among the mangrove thickets. It's uncommon to see manatees (unheard of now in the Cancún area) but possible in the protected reserves near Punta Allen (p134) and Xcalak (p137), if you're lucky. Even if you don't see a manatee, you'll spot amazing bird life: herons, egrets, storks, bitterns, and (in the right places) even flamingos or roseate spoonbills, ducks and migratory shorebirds as you glide the unpaddled pathways.

You'll find that many hotels and inns have kayaks for rent or for guests' use. Hostal del Pirata (p209) in Campeche arranges kayaking trips to Reserva de la Biosfera Los Petenes, a network of mangroves north of the city, and around the Isla de Jaina, which is an archaeological site on a small island up the coast. The Laguna de Términos in southern Campeche was a good kayaking spot, but a 2007 oil spill in the Bay of Campeche may have put an end to that. You'll want to call ahead to see how the region is faring. Kayaking tours in northern Quintana Roo can be booked through Playa del Carmen's

The Cozumel Dive Guide (www.cozumeldiveguide.com) offers great maps and descriptions of the area's dives. And a little shameless plug: Lonely Planet has a dive guide to the region, too.

Alltournative (p105). In the south, book tours through Community Tours Sian Ka'an (p134).

You can rent equipment for DIY adventures all along the Caribbean coast at Cancún, Isla Holbox, Tres Ríos or at Playa Palancar near Cozumel. You can also get out onto the water at Rancho Punta Venado, Bahías de Punta Solimán, Tankah and Xcalak. The Laguna de Bacalar offers some freshwater adventure opportunities.

KITEBOARDING & WINDSURFING

The same winds that can make a dive challenging or even cause it to be canceled are a kitesurfer's dream. Strong northeast winds made Isla Holbox (p96) a prime spot for kiteboarding – though the region's protected status has put a temporary moratorium on the sport – but the whole Riviera Maya and the beaches near Progreso (p183) also see good winds. The beaches east of Progreso are much less crowded than those of Tulum (p122) or Cancún. But use care, especially when sunbathers might be within the range of a crashing kite. There's nothing like a lawsuit to spoil an otherwise fantastic vacation. It's Mexico, so don't assume that your instructor is licensed or on the lookout for dangers. Before setting off, check carefully for above-water obstacles, both moving and stationary. Check in and around the water for swimmers, boats and so on. Ask where the reef is and whether there are any other underwater obstacles that could pose a problem. In all but the biggest tourist centers of Quintana Roo – Cancún, Playa del Carmen, Cozumel and Isla Mujeres – you'll need your own equipment.

What about windsurfing? Well, with all that great wind you'd think there'd be lots of windsurfer rentals around (you remember, those things with a real sail?) but they're becoming scarce. Some cabanas or beachside hotels still rent them (or have ones you're welcome to use). But if you're an old-school, die-hard windsurfer and you're planning on finding a rig, you might need to call around or check online (unless you're going to bring your own).

If surfing is your thing, then you're in the wrong spot, Barney. But the windward side of Cozumel does offer a few waves bigger than what you'd see in a toilet bowl.

HIKING

Hiking is a wonderful way to enjoy Yucatán's many outdoor delights. Any of the region's inland reserves make great hiking spots. Ruin-hoppers will find that even relatively flat areas, such as Chichén Itzá (p186), offer one or two hours of strenuous – even difficult – walking, especially around the midday heat. Bring a hat and lots of water. Less visited areas, such as Dzibanché (p145) and Kohunlich (p146), offer beautiful vistas from the tops of the structures, and lots of small trails through truly awesome jungle. The walking tours on Isla Contoy (p96) afford great opportunities to see birdlife.

FINDING A DIVE SHOP & STAYING SAFE

There's no such thing as a free dive. Beware of dive shops that promise certification after just a few hours' instruction. Make sure the dive shop is certified by **PADI** (www.padi.com), **NAUI** (www.nau.com) or **FMAS** (www.fmas.org.mx), the internationally recognized Mexican diving organization, and that its accreditation is up to date. If you don't have your own equipment, ask to see theirs before you commit. And ask to talk with your dive master before you leave. Make sure you feel comfortable with them: after all, it's your life. Lastly, remember that it's wise to know the locations of the nearest decompression chambers and the emergency telephone numbers, and to avoid diving less than 18 hours before a high-altitude flight.

February and March are the worst months for norte winds, which can close ports and frustrate divers, but are great news for kiteboarders.

Alternative and agro-tourism are on the rise throughout the peninsula. You can learn more about Quintana Roo's rural tourism alternatives at www.puertaverde.com.mx.

Hiking tours are also available through companies located in the larger towns, such as Mérida (p157), Xpujil (p225) and San Cristóbal de Las Casas (p235). Many companies combine walks in national parks with visits to Maya sites. The tour operator in Xpujil offers weeklong jungle treks through the Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul (p225) for those who just can't get enough of being bitten by mosquitoes.

The highlands of Chiapas are a great place for hiking, though you'll want to exercise extreme caution here given the current political situation. The Selva Lacandona (Lacandon Jungle; see boxed text, p242) is one of the most biodiverse spots in Mexico.

Yucatán also offers DIY-style hikes at just about anywhere you feel like parking the car. Ruined haciendas, overgrown jungle trails, a mile of flotsam-studded coastline – the wonders of Yucatán's outdoors are limited mainly by your own imagination and what you have time for.

That said, remember that this is the boonies: prepare carefully if you're going to be heading off the beaten track. Tell someone where you're headed and when you're due back, and bring relevant maps, a cell phone and GPS. Valuables left in a car are unlikely to be stolen, especially once you're outside the bigger cities, but it's a possibility. Actual muggings are even rarer, but it's always safer to travel as part of a group. More likely are problems with scorpions (painful, but not deadly), vipers (yep, deadly) or (wouldn't this make a great story?) crocodiles – in Celestún's estuaries they can reach a length of 6m (though this is rare). Even in the well-traveled spots such as the Ruta Puuc ruins there are poorly marked sinkholes: a wrong step could snap a leg or even plop you into an inescapable chamber below. Have fun, but keep the thinking cap on.

CYCLING

The relatively flat terrain of most of the Yucatán Peninsula can make pedaling an attractive option, though it's best to steer clear of busy roads where possible. Valladolid has a nice 5km bike trail to its nearby cenotes (p194). Campeche has a bike trail along its *malecón* (seafront promenade; p208) that would make for a pleasant spin. The secondary roads throughout the peninsula are all good biking spots, and most Maya living in the countryside get around on utilitarian tricycles. Mérida (p149) closes its downtown streets on Sundays to make room for cyclists and street vendors.

Bicycles are available for rent at the hostels in Campeche (p208), Isla Mujeres (p95), Cozumel (p118), Tulum (p128), Cobá (p129), Río Lagartos (p199) and Valladolid (p196).

For tips on cycling in the Yucatán, see above.

WATCHING WILDLIFE & BIRDS

In the Yucatán you can head inland into jungle so remote that it still has populations of jaguars, known only because of the occasional discoveries of half-eaten spider monkeys. Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul (p222) and Punta Laguna (p132) offer your best chances of seeing a jaguar in the wild, but (seriously) don't get your hopes up. At Punta Laguna, native guides take you on a walking tour that will most probably include sightings of spider and howler monkeys. Extended trips may be possible, too, but should only be undertaken by expert trekkers who have ample experience.

Both Calakmul (p222) and Laguna de Términos (p219) are prime birding spots. Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul has 235 different kinds of birds, of which 76% are resident species, including the ocellated turkey, a large bird with rainbow plumage like a peacock. Similar birding experiences can be found at Río Lagartos (p198) and Celestún (p180).

Nonprofit Amigos de Isla Contoy (www.islacontoy.org) has good information on visiting the island bird sanctuary.

Spotting manatees is difficult but may be possible on a kayaking trip (see p66), which is also a great way to see birdlife. You can swim with whale sharks (see boxed text, p97) off the coast of Isla Holbox.

For more information on what you can see and where, check p59.

FISHING

The Caribbean coast has some good sport fishing, and the areas around Punta Allen (p134) and Xcalak (p137) are famous for their catch-and-release fly-fishing. Further north, fishing can be done on Isla Mujeres and around Cozumel. In Yucatán state, the popular areas are Río Lagartos (p198) and San Felipe (p200).

ZIPLINING & OTHER ADRENALINE RUSHES

Ziplining has become popular in recent years, and many of the cenote adventures also offer (or include) the adrenaline-filled, bird's-eye dangle over the jungle canopy. It's not as heart-stopping as bungee jumping or parachuting, but it's a whole lot safer and still pretty good fun. Hidden Worlds, which offers cave tours in its cenote park (p120), also has ziplining, as do many of the tour operators out of Cancún and Playa del Carmen.

All-terrain vehicle (ATV) and off-road tours are other possible outdoor thrills that are offered and often touted; however, weigh the potential fun with the clear and obvious environmental destruction that ATVs cause: tearing up trails, destroying plant and animal life. They are especially harmful to the fragile dune ecologies, as many of the plants that prevent the sand from shifting or blowing away can be killed with a single footstep, let alone a wheel of a vehicle. We feel most readers will want to find less destructive ways to enjoy their time in Yucatán, so ATV-specific tour operators have not been listed. Those who want to rent one, however, will have no problem finding a place that offers ATVs.

THE QUIET OUTDOORS

OK, so you're reading all this thinking, 'Every time I feel adrenaline it's right before I throw up... isn't there something relaxing I can do outside?' Of course there is. Even for folks who aren't adrenaline junkies, Yucatán offers great opportunities for quiet outdoor fun. The shallow waters between Isla Mujeres' Playa Norte and Punta Norte (p90) are perfect for low-key, no-current splashing and wading, and would be perfect for anyone with kids in tow. And Yucatán is blessed with hundreds of miles of beaches perfect for combing. Few things are nicer than softly padding your way along the beach as the sun sets (or rises).

By putting the guidebook down and exploring the little-known sights beyond the 'Lonely Planet Trail,' you create a more sustainable model for tourism.

DELVE DEEPER INTO NATURE – VOLUNTEER

One of the best ways to get up close and personal with wildlife is by volunteering your time – or money – to protect it. For more volunteer opportunities in the region, see boxed text, p264.

- **AmeriSpan** (www.amerispan.com) Offers volunteer opportunities in environmental education and other areas.
- **Mexicoservación** (www.mexicoservacion.org) This NGO dedicated to coastal preservation often looks for volunteers to study the reefs and coasts of Quintana Roo.
- **Pronatura** (www.pronatura-ppy.org.mx) An environmental NGO that seeks volunteers to work with sea-turtle nesting areas in the Yucatán and in other projects.
- **Vive Mexico** (www.vivemexico.org) NGO that coordinates international social, ecological and cultural work camps in Mexico.

Progreso (p183), Río Lagartos (p198) and Celestún (p179) all offer beautiful beaches. Between Mahahual (p136) and Xcalak (p137) there are lovely stretches of sand, fringed by palm trees and strewn with coral and conch shells, though there's also an amazing (sometimes fascinating!) amount of trash. Some of the hotels in this area employ full-time beach-cleaners to wander through every few hours and keep their sections clean.

There's plenty of golf to be found here, especially in Quintana Roo – some would say too much. A whole lot of mangrove forest is sacrificed to create the courses here. Wouldn't it be better to take up a less detrimental sport like co-ed naked blue whale spearing?

Parks and plazas are an integral part of Mexican and Yucatecan life, one that's often overlooked as we travelers dash about from one must-see sight to another. Yet few activities offer a better insight into the lifestyle and character of a town than a few hours spent people-watching in an outdoor park. It's a great opportunity to chat with locals: put the guidebook down for a while and get their suggestions on where to eat or what to see.